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# The Least Restrictive Environment Clause of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Institutional Ableism: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT CLAUSE OF THE INDIVIDUALS  
WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT AND INSTITUTIONAL ABLEISM: A  
CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Educational Leadership

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by  
Laura C. O'Laughlin  
May 2013

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Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

This study focused on terms anchored in special education and associated stigma of disability in schools. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ensured the right to education in US public school systems for students with disabilities. An associated term asserted that children with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Yet, IDEA did not address the institutional or social stigma arising in the wake of labeling students as disabled. The stigma, a result of ableism, promotes a premise of normalcy and marginalizes students with disabilities. This study was a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the LRE clause. This intensive CDA investigated LRE from macro-policy terms through interpretations at state and local levels into one public school system among selected elementary school principals.

Theoretical frameworks of positivism have dominated research and professional practices in the field of special education. However, the terminology and discourse associated with IDEA has largely gone unchallenged. CDA was used to answer the following research questions:

Does the LRE clause of the IDEA create or reinforce institutional ableism?

- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within case law interpretations and federal regulations related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices in the LRE section of the South Carolina Office of Exceptional Children Process Guide?

- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within a selected urban district's policies and guidelines related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices found in face-to-face interviews with five traditional elementary school principals?

Three cycles of coding were applied to elicit discourse strands, or themes, within the data. Resulting themes included use of dichotomous language, individual deficit models of disability, hegemonic struggles between students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and central office support staff. Additionally, the voices of participants provided an opportunity to expand the study and consider additional themes and an emerging theory about the educational ecosystem of a school.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for their unwavering support. To my parents, Dan and Sue Engler, for the countless days they spent supporting and encouraging my activities and academic endeavors. They were, and continue to be, my role models for the importance of hard and dedication. To my husband, Sean, for his endless love and encouragement. He provided me with continual praise, time, and space. In return, he requested nothing. To my children, Allyson and Padraig, for demonstrating willingness to sacrifice in exchange for an intangible reward not meant for them. If I have accomplished anything, I hope I have shown my children that learning is a life-long process, that perseverance pays off, and that the accomplishments which matter most are the ones that were the hardest to achieve.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks and appreciation to Dr. Jane Clark Lindle for persevering with me throughout my time as a PhD student and throughout this dissertation process.

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The members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Patricia First, Dr. Curtis Brewer, and Dr. Pamela Stecker, have generously provided me with their time and expertise. I thank them for their contributions and support, my work is better because of them.

I am grateful to the participants and school district which the constraints of confidentiality prevent me from naming. They were enormously helpful and honest. They gave me one of a principal's most precious commodities, their time. This study would not have been possible without their support.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Introduction**

“The stigma of a disability will never diminish as long as the needs of children with disabilities are defined outside of the context of the needs of all children” (Palley, 2006, p. 234). Palley’s observation is provocative to all educators, and generative of a host of additional questions. How is the stigma of disability associated with all children? What does she mean by ‘the context of the needs’? Does there have to be a context for a need to exist? On what basis would the dire prediction “will never diminish” become fulfilled?

This study emerged from an attempt to locate the historical roots of the field of special education, to understand how the current *stigma* exists and operates, and to apply a critical analysis to investigate Palley’s prediction. Because the discourse about special education includes more than 40 years of documentation, the study is limited to only one of the fundamental requirements of U.S. education policy focused on students with disabilities. That focus was on one of the original terms found in policy, *Least Restrictive Environment* (LRE) (Beratan, 2006). The long-held definition of LRE is a requirement specified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This study was designed to conduct a critical discourse analysis of LRE which requires education of students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (Beratan, 2006). Throughout this study, I critically explored how the LRE clause of IDEA impacted

multiple layers of education policies and procedures and the local interpretation and implementation of those policies and procedures.

This chapter is organized into eight parts. First, I provide a background that sets the context for this study. The second part includes the statement of this problem and lists significant issues leading to the need for the study. Third, I define the purpose of the study and how it confronts the identified issues with terminology associated with IDEA policies and practices. Then I describe this study's potential significant contributions to the field of education. The chapter concludes with a description of the theoretical framework for the study and overview of the research methodology that will be fully explained in Chapter 3.

### **Background of Study**

This section is designed to provide a) brief overview of IDEA and the LRE clause, b) a description of IDEA as a rights-based law, c) an alternative to the rights-based law perspective using a social theory model, and d) a description of special education as a parallel operating system within K-12 public education.

### **The IDEA**

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 94-142, was originally passed in 1975 and through several reauthorizations has come to be known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA. On the heels of the civil rights movement, families of children with disabilities who had been denied access to the public schools began filing lawsuits utilizing rights to public education precedents set in the Brown v. Board of Education case of the 1950s. Families claimed that denying their

students an education amounted to a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (Beratan, 2006; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987, Smith, 2006). One of those lawsuits, Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971), resulted in a federal district court overturning a state law that had “relieved schools of the responsibility of enrolling ‘uneducable’ or ‘untrainable’ children” (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987, p. 369). The court based its decision on expert testimony that children with intellectual disabilities could benefit from schooling (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Other similar cases around the country forced the Congress to address the educational rights of children with disabilities as a national issue. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) reinforced school-aged children’s rights to attend public schools. P.L. 94-142 has undergone several reauthorizations over the years. During the 1990 reauthorization the law became known as IDEA. At least three significant changes to the original law were made at that time including (a) a change from the term *handicap* to *disability*, (b) expanding school-age eligibility from ages between 5 and 18 to from birth to age 21, and (c) placing an even greater emphasis on educating students with disabilities in the general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate. Although primarily a funding bill, IDEA, and its predecessor versions, required states to adhere to certain student rights in order to receive federal money. These rights can be summarized into five main concepts:

1. All children with disabilities, regardless of the nature of their disability, have a right to and must be provided with a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

2. All children with disabilities will have a right to and must receive an Individual Education Program (IEP) that is tailored to address the child's unique learning needs.
3. Children with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with their nondisabled peers to the *maximum extent appropriate*.
4. Students with disabilities must have access to all areas of school participation.
5. Children with disabilities and their families are guaranteed rights with respect to non-discriminatory testing, confidentiality and due process. (IDEA, 1990; IDEA, 2004; Beratan, 2006)

Beratan (2006) acknowledged that the common belief IDEA encourages and promotes inclusive education grew out of a definition of LRE, which implied a preference for educating students with disabilities in the same environment as their peers without disabilities.

The LRE clause of IDEA created a full spectrum of opinions on the depth and breadth of the meaning and interpretation of the term *maximum extent appropriate* (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). Scholars increasingly argue against the dichotomous concepts of inclusion/exclusion in schools, the existence of which effectively marginalizes children if they fall into either category (Valle, Connor, Broderick, Bejoian, & Baglieri, 2011). As far back as the 1980s, Gartner and Lipsky (1987) argued that there was no compelling evidence that segregated special education programs had any significant benefits for students. More recently, Zuna and Turnbull (2004) argued that the creation of laws such as P.L. 94-142 used to categorize children for funding purposes were probably a mistake

from the start. They reasoned that a better policy would have been one that addressed the needs of all students. Research has demonstrated that segregation of students who learn differently is ineffective because,

- a. exposure to appropriate student models is absent or minimal,
- b. students with severe disabilities tend to learn ‘handicapped’ skills, attitudes, and values,
- c. teachers tend to strive for the resolution of educational ‘problems’ at the expense of developing functional community-referenced skills,
- d. most comparisons between students are made in relation to degrees of disability rather than a criteria performance, and
- e. lack of exposure to students who learn differently limits the probability that the skills attitudes and values students without disabilities will become more constructive and appropriate. (Smith, 2006)

Smith (2006) explained the consistent claims justifying segregated settings came out of a litany of diagnostic labels required under IDEA to fund education for students with disabilities. The ill effects of the categorical funding mechanism entwined with an ongoing fear that these students would detract from the education of others because of their need for greater attention and resources.

According to Palley (2006), IDEA demonstrated preference to educating students with disabilities in LRE because of the belief that inclusion in a general education setting would help improve both their cognitive education and social relations. She also cautioned that the law did not address the needs of students without disabilities and their

ability to relate to individuals with difference. Because the LRE clause focuses exclusively on the needs of students with disabilities, Skilton-Sylvester and Slesaransky-Poe (2009) worried that the clause would become more managerial than substantive. They noted that instances of placing students in the same room “has taken the place of meaningful interactions over time that would acknowledge the unique contributions of these students to the community and allow all students to be members rather than dividing the group into mainstream members and guests with IEPs” (p. 36).

### **IDEA as a Rights-Based Law**

The American legal system is a rights-based system. In this type of system, equal rights are served through protecting the civil rights of individual citizens (Palley, 2006; Skilton-Sylvester & Slesaransky-Poe, 2009; Zuna & Turnbull, 2004). According to Palley (2006), embedded in this system is the assumption that protecting the rights of individuals is the first step to ensuring that the rights of groups of individuals are protected. The legislative branch protects groups by creating laws (i.e. IDEA) and the judicial branch interprets the law on an individual student basis. “Because of this assumption, individual cases in several of the federal circuit courts have been decided based on the individual rights of the children for whom the cases were brought” (Palley, 2006, p. 230).

Scholars have argued that a rights-based legal system is not an effective way to create systemic change (Beratan, 2006; Palley, 2006; Skilton-Sylvester & Slesaransky-Poe, 2009; Zuna & Turnbull, 2004). Skilton-Sylvester and Slesaransky-Poe (2009) have argued that legal mandates under IDEA focused exclusively on the rights of a few



without ever addressing the normative assumptions, which exist in schools and classrooms in ways that could change the system for all students. Schools then take their cues from individual case-law interpretations, which may ultimately be more limiting than liberating (Beratan, 2006; Palley, 2006; Zuna & Turnbull, 2004). Additionally, the rights-based system continues to favor those in power (Valle et al., 2011). “Students with parents who have the resources to sue may be able to access services and be included in educational settings in which special accommodations are made that are not available to other students” (Palley, 2006, p. 229).

In this rights-based system, schools are not being encouraged to redefine their perceptions of *normalcy*. Jordan (2005) defines normalcy as the ability to function within the tacit norms and assumptions of those situated within the culture of power. More often, students with disabilities are being pushed into general education settings according to an externally imposed standard (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Those standards, when based on case-law interpretation, will vary greatly depending on the federal circuit and individual district.

As a result of the different standards that are used by federal circuit courts, the extent to which courts show a preference toward including children with disabilities with their nondisabled peers varies greatly. Much of this variation can be traced to the facts of the cases that the circuit courts reviewed. As a result of the differing standards, the extent to which school districts and states have facilitated the inclusion of students with disabilities varies greatly. Moreover, because none of these cases were class actions, the decisions will not necessarily

lead to structural changes in the overall system but rather to improvements in the rights of individual children in a system not necessarily set up to include them in the LRE. As a result, other children will likely continue to be excluded and to fall through the cracks that remain. (Palley, 2006, p. 232)

### **A Social Theory Alternative**

The nature of rights-based law, where one group classifies others as needing civil protection, limits the relationship between the two (Palley, 2006). Danforth (2006) warned that definitions of disability, traditionally used as a way to describe someone, should be handled with critical awareness and sensitivity. He advocated for inclusive educators to become more aware of the political and social practices that promote and sustain division and devaluation of students with disabilities.

Alternatives to a rights-based approach could include questioning the perceptions and attitudes about the way people believe a society should function (Kudlick, 2003). “The assumptions that people hold, ways of talking about disability, and interpersonal interactions are crucial to the production of certain individuals as disabled” (Jordan, 2005, p. 131). Kudlick (2003) argued that explaining disability as, in the final analysis, a political or moral judgment and not based on anything about the individual in question, would challenge these perceptions and attitudes.

Until society recognizes disability as a social construct and not an individual deficit, children in the public schools will continue to be labeled and stigmatized as disabled, particularly African American children (Beratan, 2006; Jordan, 2005; Palley, 2006).

Attributions of disability deflect attention from the ways in which these students are marginalized by constructions of normalcy that privilege the white, middle- and upper middle-class, able-bodied male. These constructions often reflect the tacit norms and assumptions of those from...the 'culture of power,' ....

Abnormality then comes to be defined as the extent to which certain lifestyles and behaviors vary from the mainstream, and the construct of disability is made available to support a medical orientation and response toward these differences.

(Jordan, 2005, pp. 130-131)

Fierros (2006) warned that although IDEA was designed to meet the needs of diverse learners, it has been used to both create and perpetuate the marginalization of children based on interconnected discourses of ability, race, and gender.

The risk of identifying male African American children as intellectually disabled increases in states where African Americans are most heavily concentrated, and the highest levels of overrepresentation occur in several states with a history of racial apartheid, such as Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida and Alabama (Jordan, 2005). Additionally, research indicates that African American children within high-incident disability categories and segregated classroom placements go hand-in-hand. "This troubling picture of overrepresentation and exclusion therefore warrants consideration of how African American youth are positioned and constructed as disabled within the organizational and disciplinary discourse of school" (Jordan, 2005, p. 129).

Fierros (2006) supported Palley's (2006) argument regarding the limitations of a rights-

based law approach by claiming that even when improvements are made for students with disabilities, they tend to be made for White students with disabilities first.

Imagine the fulfillment of a “civil covenant in which those with disabilities are seen as legitimate members of communities in spite of the ways those communities may need to be restructured so that all members can achieve full participation” (Skilton-Sylvester & Slesaransky-Poe, 2009). Although IDEA has been portrayed as an anti-discrimination and civil rights law, special education has not adequately addressed the complex issues of exclusion and discrimination at both individual and institutional levels (Beratan, 2006; Danforth, 2006). Palley (2006) argued that the most effective way to ensure all students with disabilities are educated in the LRE is not to stigmatize children by applying labels, but rather to extend the rights of appropriate education to all children. Many children may need additional assistance or specialized placement, but such needs do not necessarily require the use of labels. “However, there are many institutional obstacles that have made, and may continue to make, this idea difficult to implement” (Palley, 2006, p. 230).

### **Parallel Educational Systems**

Legal mandates that look toward the rights of people with disabilities outside of the context of the rights of all people may reinforce paternalistic traditions and may either facilitate or inhibit the inclusion of individuals with disabilities into mainstream society. In other words, societal relationships are affected by the way laws are constructed and implemented. Special education and the theories behind inclusive education are rooted in exclusionary practices (Palley, 2006; Rafal, 2009). “Hegemonic ideology underlies much

of the educational policy towards disabled students, and its contradictory claims continue to (dis)order our theories, policies, practices, and even our vocabulary” (Rafal, 2009, p. 242).

Schools are generally expected to enhance the opportunities for students and contribute to the creation of a more equitable and democratic society. Artiles, Harris-Murri, and Rostenburg (2006) argued that schools have been actually maintaining societal inequities. They name programs for students with disabilities as evidence of a segregated system, which by virtue of the design of special education, operates as a parallel system.

Although the original impetus for the creation of special education was to serve a neglected population, in reality special education’s separate location perpetuated the mainstream education system’s refusal to work with a wider range of human abilities. The rights and ethics discourse states that the existence of a dual educational system prevents systemic changes to make education responsive to an increasingly diverse society.... The existence of parallel educational systems privileges professional groups (e.g. school psychologists, special educators) that control specific areas of expertise, which in turn affords them privileged positions and compels them to resist inclusion efforts. (Artiles et al., 2006, p. 261)

The separate, parallel system was originally established so children with special needs could be educated by specially trained teachers in small or individualized environments. Because of this history, general education and special education teachers are trained in separate post-secondary education programs. Perceived differences in training often

leaves general education teachers feeling unprepared for teaching students with special needs and believing that specialized instructional techniques designed for students with disabilities are not easily transferable to a general education setting (Palley, 2006).

Beratan (2006) interpreted the LRE clause *to the maximum extent appropriate*, as implying for educational practices “to the maximum extent appropriate to an individual’s deficit” (p. 3). He argued that this implication of an inherently separate system is one way that IDEA sends a message of *ableism* into the educational system, regardless of the intent of those who wrote it (Beratan, 2006). Ableism can be described briefly as the belief that is better not to have a disability than to have one or that it is better to do things the way that nondisabled members of society do things (Storey, 2007). Storey (2007) noted that ableism exists at the individual, cultural, and institutional levels.

Similar to institutional racism, institutional ableism is distinguished from the individual bigotry toward people with disabilities by the existence of systemic, pervasive, and habitual policies and practices that disadvantage individuals based on their abilities. But because of institutional ableism’s hold on our society, it is unlikely that any legal remedy will eliminate the educational inequity faced by students with disabilities. (Fierros, 2006, p. 2)

### **Significance of Study**

The rights-based approach indicts educational inequity and exclusion as systems failure. Evidence of systems failure exists at statistical levels demonstrating over-identification of many students who also are marginalized by race and gender in public schools. Studies such as the one reported in this dissertation offer more than statistical

notes about systemic failure. This study used policy terms from the federal to the school levels to demonstrate the socialized discourse that has institutionalized inequitable and exclusionary practices. Systemic reform may force schools to transform their structures and attitudes towards students with disabilities (Rafal, 2009). Liasidou (2008) recommended that a dismantling process emerge from the top-down, challenging the powerful discourses and unequal power relationships embedded within policy documents such as IDEA. Disability research and scholarship should move beyond the traditional deficit model of disability and the common belief that students with disabilities are mostly dependent recipients in need of protective policies (Burch & Sutherland, 2006; Danforth, 2006).

The parochial obsession with the equation of difference with anomaly is still at the fore and finds its expression through the ways that policymakers, parents and professionals try to transcend uncertainty and ambiguity through the normative assumptions of special education thinking. (Liasidou, 2008, p. 486)

There is an innate value in new ways of thinking. It is time for researchers to articulate views that are substantially different from conventional thinking (Paul, 2002). Palley's (2006) analysis of the rights-based perspective of the IDEA demonstrated that "laws for people with disabilities must address more than individual rights if these laws are going to be successful in reducing the stigma and improving the status of people with disabilities in society" (p. 234).

Approximately every five years, the U.S. Congress must reauthorize Parts C and D of the IDEA to prevent their expiration. Part C governs all services provided to infants

and toddlers identified as being at-risk for developmental delays. Part D authorizes national program activities and federal research funding agendas. Although Part B (the special education requirements for individuals ages 3-21) was permanently reauthorized, it is usually reviewed and revised when Congress undertakes reauthorizing Parts C and D (Dale, 2011). Most researchers in the field believe that Congress will move directly on to IDEA after they finish the current work being done on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind), but both have been delayed throughout the Obama administration (Lee, 2010). As demonstrated by the sources referenced in this chapter, recent critical research done on the systemic effect of the LRE clause immediately followed the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, now nearly a decade old. The need for current work on the language and right-based perspective of IDEA should be conducted prior to reauthorization for it to be of use for the immediate future of students with disabilities. This study represents one step in providing a critical update to policy implications for IDEA found in the educational practices and understandings of LRE.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine discourses that undergird the social construction of the LRE clause of IDEA. This study explored the relationship between LRE and the presence of ableism in state policies and, in turn, in public schools.

### **Research Questions**

Does the LRE clause of the IDEA create or reinforce institutional ableism?



- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within case law interpretations and federal regulations related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices in the LRE section of the South Carolina Office of Exceptional Children Process Guide?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within a selected urban district's policies and guidelines related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices found in face-to-face interviews with five traditional elementary school principals?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study rests on specific assumptions and philosophy brought into it (Crotty, 2003; Glesne, 2011). Crotty's (2003) recommended process for supporting the design of a social science research proposal included moving deductively through four steps, each becoming more specific to the study. The initial step is the identification of a theory of how knowledge exists, or epistemology. The second step is the identification of the philosophical stance that informs the study, or the theoretical perspective. The third step is to identify the strategy or design for the study, known as the methodology. The final step is to identify the techniques or procedures that will be used and gather and analyze the data, or the methods. This design will be used to support the selected design and procedures of this proposal.

For this study, the epistemological approach was to educe knowledge from a constructivist position. According to constructionism, meaning emerges in social interactions. “Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 2003, p. 43). From this position, all meaningful reality is socially constructed. The assumptions underlying this study, provided elaboration as the theoretical perspective, or grounding of the world and social life (Crotty, 2003).

Individuals with disabilities are a social group that has been traditionally oppressed by a society that values ableism. Therefore, this research arose from a critical perspective. Critical forms of inquiry question current ideology and initiate calls for action against social injustice and hegemony (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 2003; Glesne, 2011). Glesne (2011) described three general aspects of critical research design:

1. Critical theory researchers see research as a political act because it not only relies on value systems, but challenges value systems.
2. Critical theory researchers often focus upon language or the tacit rules that regulate what can and cannot be said, who can speak with the blessings of authority and who must listen, whose social constructions are valid and whose are erroneous and unimportant.
3. Critical theory researchers are often interested in praxis, or the relationships between thought and action, theory and practice. (p. 10)

A key aspect in this study’s use of critical research was the unveiling of hidden ideologies or false consciousness that work to distort reality. Billig (2008) described how individuals use power in complex ways often lacking awareness of the extent to which

their ordinary (perceivably non-abusive) actions contribute to maintaining systems of inequality. Critical research seeks to expose those power relationships, discard distorted and false realities, create openings for new perspectives, and empower individuals to move beyond the constraints placed on them (Billig, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 2003; Glesne, 2011).

The method for this study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), has been referred to as both a theoretical perspective and a methodology (Rogers, 2004). In the pursuit of unveiling false realities, Fairclough (1995) argued that “One is typically unaware of one’s ways of talking unless for some reason they are subjected to conscious scrutiny, so also is one typically unaware of what ways of seeing, what ideological representations, underlie one’s talk” (pp. 39-40). As a methodology, CDA allows for the analysis of institutionalized forms of talking and writing, in those sites where social domination and inequality arise (Stamou & Padeliadu, 2009).

Verbal and written interactions are methods of social action (Fairclough, 1995). CDA can be used to describe, interpret, and explain the social relationships between language and society (Rogers, 2004). These interactions, or discourses, are related to the distribution of social power and the hierarchy of society. Discourse is the use of language as a social practice and discourse analysis is a study of how texts work within that societal practice (Fairclough, 1995). Having control over certain discourses can lead to the acquisition of money, power, or status in a society (Rogers, 2004). Discourses contain “a set of values and viewpoints about the relationships between people and the

distribution of social goods, at the very least, about who is an insider and who is not, often who is ‘normal’ and who is not” (Rogers, 2004, p. 5).

Methodologies common in CDA range from more to less linguistically oriented. Some methodologies are more or less interested in the historical emergence of the discourse. While a full description of the exact methods will be provided in Chapter 3, a brief overview of the research design and procedures for this study is presented below.

### **Overview of Design, Procedures, and Analysis**

The design of this study is based on van Dijk’s (2001) socio-cognitive theory of discourse, Jager’s (2001) discourse structure theory, and Fairclough’s (1995) orders of discourse concept. Procedures for this proposal include the following data gathering methods:

- Collection of recent legal definitions through federal and South Carolina courts’ case law along with statutory definitions found within IDEA.
- Collection of the most recent federal regulations and subsequent regulation iterations addressing the LRE clause of IDEA.
- Collection of the most recent State Office of Exceptional Children Process Guide sections addressing LRE.
- Development and piloting of an interview protocol for elementary school principals.
- Conducting, recording, and transcribing interviews with five elementary school district principals.

When beginning the data analysis process it is critical to identify both the lexical (hard) and pragmatic structures (soft) of language.

Hard structures include aspects of the linguistic system such as adjectives, nouns, and verbs. Soft structures include the function of language. They are referred to as soft structures because of the level of abstraction. The goal of an empirically based CDA is to describe, interpret, and explain the relationship between the hard and soft structures of language. (Rogers, 2004, p. 8)

Specific forms in a language are typically used as tools for communication. The interpretation of language stem from expectations about how that language is generally used. According to Gee (2004), those expectations of language structures can be called *meaning potentials*. The analysis portion of this study included the study of relationship between the language form and function at their meaning potential level. Form refers to things like “morphemes, words, phrases, or other syntactic structures (e.g., the subject position of a sentence). Function refers to the meaning or the communicative purpose a form carries out” (Gee, 2004, p. 25).

Discourse is always part of specific social practices and social practices always have implications for political characteristics such as status and power (Gee, 2004; Rogers, 2004). In CDA, an explanation of how language contributes to these power relationships is the heart of the research endeavor (Fairclough, 1995). The final data analysis portion of this study involved exploring the ways in which meaning potential and form function correlations were associated with social practices (Gee, 2004). Social practices are routine activities that people use to accomplish shared goals based on shared

(conscious or unconscious) knowledge. “Because critical discourse analysis argues that language in use is always part and parcel of, and partially constitutive of, one or more specific social practices, language in use is inherently and inextricably political” (Gee, 2004, pp. 33-34). The goal is to identify the praxis through which ableism may be created or reinforced within this particular order of discourse.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the problem of institutional *ableism* and establish a historical perspective on how ableism may have emerged through educational policy. The purpose and significance for this study were identified along with four specific research questions. An overview of the theoretical framework provided support for an overview of the research design, procedures, and data analysis. Chapter Two includes a synthesis of the available literature on the history of disabilities, dominant discourses with the social domain, and the significance that ableism continues to have on the field of special education. Chapter Three presents the conceptual basis of the method, Critical Discourse Analysis, and lists the procedures for this study. Chapter Four includes results of the study. Chapter Five introduces an emergent theory generated from the results. Chapter Six offers the implications for policy, practice and research in the field of school leadership for all students.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

This chapter includes the two following primary goals: a) provide a complete and current review of the research topic and b) a demonstration of a thorough understanding of the field of study (Galvan, 2009). The review is a synthesis of the literature surrounding inclusive practices and perceptions for students with disabilities as seen from the theoretical perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). According to Boote and Beile (2005), a literature review is designed to be a thorough representation of how the author reviewed, analyzed, and synthesized relevant literature on a select topic. To demonstrate thoroughness, authors can use figures, graphs, and other forms of nonlinguistic representation to illustrate theoretical formations or process models (Marzano, 2010; American Psychological Association, 2010). A nonlinguistic representation of the framework used to conduct this review is depicted in Figure 2.1.

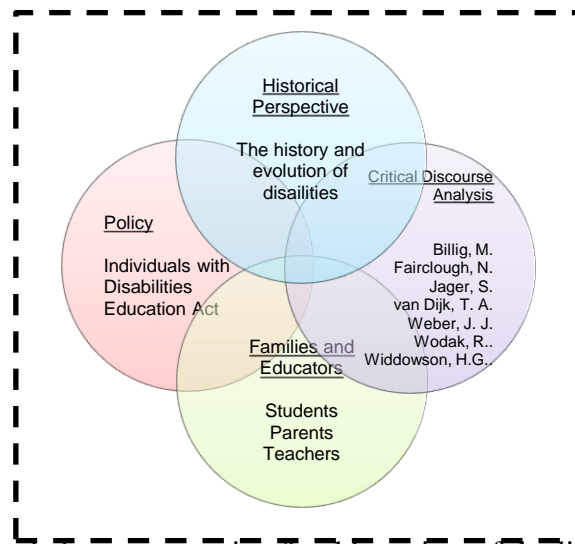


Figure 2.1. A nonlinguistic representation for this review of the literature.

Although there has been significant growth in the field of CDA over the last 20 years (Fairclough, 1995), very little research is currently available concerning discourse about students identified in educational systems as differently learning. In reviewing literature on a topic in which little has been written, Boote and Beile (2005) recommended that researchers examine analogous research in other fields or topics. Young (1999) suggested that viewing a topic through one lens and subsequently reconsidering it through another lens, encourages the exploration of similarities and differences in the findings. For this review, four different perspectives were considered. The first step was to view the history and evolution of the concept of *disability*. Viewing the discourse through the social history of disabilities provided grounding for further analysis. The second step was to review the methodology of CDA. Boote and Beile (2005) recommended that researchers consider strengths and weaknesses of investigative methods typical to the field of study. The works of seminal authors, both proponents and skeptics, of CDA were reviewed. The third step was to review original research, conducted using CDA, of students, families and educational professionals in the field of special education. This was of primary importance since a literature review should discuss the practical implications of the research on a topic and acknowledge the “importance of linking research and practice in the field of education” (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 9). The fourth step was to review the dominate policies which have guided the field of practice.

To meet the literature review goals, four sources were obtained. The first source of information included original empirical research. The second source of information



included theoretical articles and books surrounding the use (and misuse) of CDA. The next source of information included several reviews of literature surrounding both CDA and the history of disability studies. The final source of information included governmental publications and public laws which govern educational services to students with disabilities. The databases used for this review were *Academic Search Premier*, *Education Research Complete*, and *SocINDEX with full text*. Search terms included: Critical Discourse Analysis, disability, disability studies, discourse analysis, language, history of disability, special education, inclusion, ableism, recovery, nominalization, reification, learning disabilities, medical model, social constructs of disability, disability as a deficit, and the names of various seminal scholars as cited throughout the review. The information gathered was synthesized and reorganized into five main sections: the history of disability, the use of language in research, the field of special education, the power of policy, and the use of CDA.

### **The History of Disabilities**

The interrogation of history is an indispensable and core component of CDA (Wodak, 2001). According to Meyer (2001), all discourses are historical and can only be understood through an analysis of those historical contexts. Specifically, when analyzing discourse it is critical to understand the particular social conditions within which the discourse and its properties were originated and how those social conditions fit into a wider historical perspective (Fairclough, 1995). It is within those social processes and structures that production of a text arises (Wodak, 2001). Additionally, all disciplines and fields have a history of dissidents, “individuals who saw things differently and

pursued another course” (Paul, 2002, p. 83). This type of disruption is a primary goal of research using CDA (Fairclough, 1995).

“Humans, in so many ways, continuously describe the world and live within the moral landscape of those descriptions” (Danforth, 2006, p. 341). This history of disability begins with an anthropological review of the treatment of people with mental illness during the landscape of the Renaissance period in Europe. Foucault was a historian who studied the historical development of power and knowledge relationships and was among the earliest to challenge social illnesses (Sawyer, 2002). Foucault’s *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965) provided a rich description of the early treatment of individuals on the outside margins of society prior to the rise of psychology and psychiatry as forms of science. Foucault (1965) described the first movement of individuals considered plagued by madness as the *Ship of Fools*. Generally men, they would be arrested by municipal authorities and handed over to boatmen.

To hand a madman over to sailors was to be permanently ensure he would not be prowling beneath the city walls; it made sure that he would go far away; it made him a prisoner of his own departure. But water adds to this the dark mass of its own values; it carries off, but it does more: it purifies. Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last. (Foucault, 1965, pp. 10-11)

Eventually the Ship of Fools was replaced by various methods of hospital and asylum confinements. From the middle of the 17th Century, confinement became the

natural abode for madness. Foucault (1965) described madness as being redefined by society and religion to fit the inability to work and to integrate with the community. “The new meanings assigned to poverty, the importance given to the obligation to work, and all the ethical values that are linked to labor, ultimately determined the experience of madness and inflected its course” (Foucault, 1965, p. 64). Confinement constituted a dense symbol of policy and control, the “civil equivalent of religion for the edification of a perfect city” (Foucault, 1965, p. 63). What had previously been explained as error would become fault, blindness would symbolize unconsciousness, and other qualities considered unnatural manifestations of madness would become the natural punishment of some moral evil (Foucault, 1965). Historians Burch and Sutherland (2006) described how hospitals and asylums became institutionalized to control the inhabitants, shielding society from their presence. Workers in such institutions represented a rising professionalization of human behavioral control (Burch & Sutherland, 2006).

### **The rise of the medical model and expansion of disabilities**

Foucault (1965) argued that madness was not what society believed and not what it believed itself to be. Viewed as *diseases of the nerves* or *hysterias*, madness helped provide a foundation for the origin of psychiatry. The late 19th and early 20th Centuries brought a flood of theories that defined disability as defect or sickness and adhered to theories, such as *biological determinism*, *eugenics*, and evolution’s *survival of the fittest* (Burch & Sutherland, 2006; Kudlick, 2003; York & Clark, 2006). York and Clark (2006) referred to this period of time as one of political retrenchments and the destruction of social generosity. Born from these theories was the still utilized concept of *the medical*

*model*. The medical model view of disability eventually evolved to an approach that personalizes disability, placing a deficit within an individual, requiring them to attempt to correct or amend the deficiency (Kudlick, 2003).

Behind the medical model is the theoretical perspective of positivism. Crotty (2003) reported that over the last 150 years, there are very distinguishable common threads found in fields conducting research. “It starts with objectivism (as epistemology), passes through positivism (as theoretical perspective), and is found, historically, informing many of the methodologies articulated within social research” (Crotty, 2003, p. 18). Although the meaning of positivism has changed and grown over time, it still strongly adheres to the ontology of objectivism. Positivism attempts to discover a truth and meaning inherent in the objects it considers (Crotty, 2003). “As positivism imposes itself upon medicine and psychiatry...the psychiatrist’s power” (Foucault, 1965, p. 275) becomes more and more miraculous and the doctor-patient relationship becomes deeper. Proponents of this method expressed disability as a defect or sickness in need of medical intervention in order to cure the sickness (Burch & Sutherland, 2006). An example is the emergence of the notion that intelligence as a one-dimensional feature of the brain that can be measured into an intelligence quotient (IQ). The reifying of IQ and defining disability as something residing in the individual that can be objectified had broad implications for disabled persons. They are seen as dependent on the authority of the medical profession to get better and *be* better via medical cures (Burch & Sutherland, 2006; York & Clark, 2006). Foucault (1965) argued that “these cures without basis,

which must be recognized as not being false cures, would soon become the true cures of false illnesses” (p. 275).

The last 100 years have brought other dramatic societal, economic, and political changes that further impacted the text and discourse of disabilities (Fairclough, 1995; Sleeter, 2010). As Sleeter (2010) illuminated, the standards for literacy have changed historically with “changes in requirements of the race for international supremacy, the American economy, and notions of culture and national security” (p. 212). Prior to the 20th Century, standards for literacy in American society were much different. New information was exchanged face-to-face and records or written correspondence needed for productivity were relatively simple. Children who struggled with reading were, for the most part, not considered a great societal problem (Sleeter, 2010).

Numerous wars, industrial expansion, and an international battle for economic supremacy escalated literacy standards, required more people to be able to keep and understand complex records, receive advanced training, and follow increasing difficult written directions in the workplace (Sleeter, 2010). The higher the educational standards rose, the greater the spread of achievement levels for children in schools, and the more intensely norms dispersed students into those on top and those on the bottom. Sleeter (2010) reported that,

between 1945 and 1970, jobs in manufacturing and construction increased only about 35 percent, while available positions in government and the retail, finance, and insurance sectors rose by more than 200 percent. As a result, schools were called upon to produce more workers with skills and attitudes for white collar

employment, which meant making sure more children attained increasingly high standards of achievement. (p. 213)

To keep the United States economy competitive in an increasingly global marketplace, schools were forced to move away from vocational preparation and teach more extensive and rigorous curricula (Rafal, 2009).

The rise in the medical model, combined with changes to educational standards, led to an increase in the number of different disability classifications and the number of students in need of specialized instruction in the public school system. A line of neurological research conducted in the 1930s led to data on neurological impairments and their effects on learning behaviors (Sleeter, 2010). Sleeter (2010) reported that low achievers in schools were formally identified by tests specifically constructed on the notion of average performance and the rank ordering of children. York and Clark (2006) noted that many of these newly developed tests of intellectual ability never produced valid evidence that they measured an innate or immutable ability nor even of what innate ability was revealed in the scores. Professionals assumed the measures were projections of children's learning potential, without much substantiation that these measures were precise profiles or predictors. However, by the late 1950s, "medical and psychological research, combined with parental pressure, led to the development of special school programs to meet the needs of a population of children that always had existed but only recently had been recognized" (York & Clark, 2006, p. 211). Thus, Learning Disabilities (LD) became the newest category for special education in the United States. By 1979, LD was the largest special education category. By 1982, 41% of all special education

students in the United States were categorized as LD, constituting 4.4% of all students in public schools (Sleeter, 2010).

“By borrowing from the ideology of biological determinism, educators and parents...elevated those they classified as learning disabled from those classified as slow or retarded by specifying that the organic damage affect specific areas of learning, not learning in general” (Sleeter, 2010, p. 215). Many scholars argue that the creation of the disability category LD represented an unconscious attempt to maintain race and class stratification in a way that appeared to be based on innate human variation and objective clinical assessment (Rafal, 2009; Sleeter, 2010; York & Clark, 2006). The discourse of this time became a reification of appropriate methodology and tools, while lacking a fundamental philosophy or even propositions explaining why some students struggle to learn (Paul, 2002). By focusing on deficiencies of individuals, the medical model viewed issues like relationships, family, and participation in a democratic society through the lens of the condition of the person, neglecting the role of social, economic, and political factors that affect success or quality of life (Burch & Sutherland, 2006).

### **Disability as a social construct and the new disability history**

However, the second half of the 20th Century became a theater for questioning the foundational assumptions underlying the medical model (Paul, 2002). Scholars in anthropology and literature began producing essays and monographs dealing with disability as a historical subject. This *turn*, has been used by other scholars to indicate a shift away from positivism (Kudlick, 2003; Paul, 2002). In the 1960s, individuals began to challenge claims that only psychoanalytic understandings of disabilities were valid or

that only members of clinical teams could bring about positive change. The notions of “working with and developing the positive emotional and intellectual resources of children and the ecological contexts within which the disturbance was experienced and named” became a more attractive approach than the typical practices of focusing only on the child and fixing his/her immediate educational issues (Paul, 2002, p. 83). Kudlick (2003) credited this new work on disabilities studies as an invitation to think about disability not as an individual pathology, but instead as a social category similar to race, class, and gender.

The discourse changed from diagnosis and cures to a reframing and new ways of understanding how children’s learning develops in a larger environment of social connections. This social model of disability rejected the notion that individuals with disabilities were inherently defective and in need of rehabilitation. Rather, disability was viewed as a common factor in life (Burch & Sutherland, 2006; Paul, 2002). Burch and Sutherland (2006) argued that viewing disability through a social lens exposed prejudice against individuals with disabilities and motivated activism in scholarship. For historians, disability became a significant factor in modern development, raising questions of who deserves government assistance and protection, what constitutes the designation of contributory citizenship, and who merits the rights of full citizenship (Kudlick, 2003).

Verstraete (2007) referred to this movement in the 1980s as the *New Disability History*.



New Disability History explicitly tries to contribute to the emancipation and liberation of the disabled individual...Instead of reducing the disabled person to his/her deficit, they emphasize the fact that every disability – as is true of gender, race, and class – must be considered within the complex and intertwined framework of relations of the biological and social world...disability...is not simply located in the bodies of individuals. It is a socially and culturally constructed identity. (p. 57)

Burch and Sutherland (2006) cautioned that this social construction imposes its own set of meanings on disability with its own set of limited and prejudiced understandings of what disabled life can or cannot be. Verstraete (2007) argued that the work of these new historians could be viewed as mutual gifts, meaning that individuals with disabilities discover their own history and the medical model of disability may be replaced by movements away from the margins of society. “Disability as a form of social definition – as a way of describing someone – is only one form of human description to be handled with critical awareness and conscious sensitivity” (Danforth, 2006).

Approaching disability as a social category rather than individual deficit challenged perceptions that relegated it, as Kudlick (2003) stated, “to the unglamorous backwaters primarily of interest to people in rehabilitation, special education, and other applied professional fields” (p. 235). Social constructionism, including the central idea that understanding comes from social interactions and is both historically and culturally situated, found increasing use in disability research, knowledge, and practice (Nunkoosing & Haydon-Laurel, 2011). Engaging in these more complex and political

interrogations and deconstructions of categories revealed that it was attitudinal milieu more than an individual's condition that influenced social and institutional responses (Broderick, 2009; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). As Rafal (2009) (a scholar with disabilities) indicated, "It is society that disables.... Disability is imposed on top of our impairment by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society" (p. 235).

The New Disability History movement used case studies as its bedrock. Looking at the lives of people with disabilities and the factors that informed the meaning of their disability allowed the new generation of historians to understand sociopolitical and academic trends (Burch & Sutherland, 2006). Historians Burch and Sutherland (2006) noted the field of education as one of the most prolific areas of disability study, "in part because it so obviously and strongly affects of the lives of disabled Americans, and because materials are abundant and accessible" (p. 131). A primary goal of studying disability history in education has been to peel back the layers of accumulated social customs and dismantling obstacles which restrict individuals with disabilities from full participation and dignity (Danforth, 2006). Many of these studies, taken together, resemble earlier works and debates by women's and African American historians who were primarily interested in hegemony and power relationships. Hence, New Disability History yielded what is often referred to as the *disability rights movement* (Burch & Sutherland, 2006; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987).

Individuals with disabilities have a long and storied history. Included in this history are periods of confinement, isolation, and emancipation. The study of disabilities

has attracted the attention of medical professionals, psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians. These professionals have viewed disabilities through the lens of both positivism and constructionism. Parents and advocates have utilized social movements such as the civil rights movement as a catalyst for disability rights. All of these activities have laid the foundation for the current field of special education and all of the various discourses that permeate that field.

### **Use of Language in Research**

Billig (2008) wrote that too many researchers have fallen in love with their technical language and warned that “love can make us blind” (p. 837). There are various views on the use and relevance of specific language choices. Proponents of CDA, such as Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, and Joseph (2005), have argued that discourse as language use is a primarily social practice. They believe that the use of language moves back and forth between both reflecting and constructing the social world. In their view, language could never be considered neutral. Proponents of pragmatism as a social theory, such as Rorty (1981) and Danforth (2006), have argued that the study of language choice and what they might mean for individuals and groups is a relatively useless struggle. Rorty (1981) held that there was no way that vocalized sounds or symbols scribbled in ink could somehow match up to a world independent of any interpretation. Both Rorty (1981) and Danforth (2006) believed that language was something that allowed individuals to interact and organize in a physical world. They also argued that research should be primarily for the practitioner and have a direct use within the field of study. Regardless of philosophical position, most scholars agree that

the language used in research is heavily burdened with technical terms and everyone would be better served if researchers could find a way of writing that does not turn people into objects or reify them (Billig, 2008; Danforth, 2006; Rorty, 1981). The purpose of this section is to discuss the use of technical terms throughout special education practice and research.

One of the debates surrounding CDA involves the use of nominalization. Martin (2008) described nominalization as the act of producing a noun from another part of speech, such as turning a verb into a noun. A term is created by the law of supply and demand, the expansion of disciplines, and the discourse that satisfies an intellectual need (Sawyer, 2002). An example of nominalization is the emergence of the word *ableism* in the field of special education during the 1980s. The noun *ableism* emerged out of the verb *able* during the expansion of disability studies. It can briefly be described as the “belief that it is better or superior not to have a disability than to have one and that it is better to do things in the way that nondisabled people do” (Storey, 2007, p. 56). It is now used frequently in the scholarly field to label and identify disability discrimination (Hehir, 2002). Arguments exist for both the usefulness and abuse of nominalization.

Martin (2008) argued in favor of nominalization, indicating that it is used to build and organize knowledge. By defining complex processes within a single term, writers are able to spare themselves and their readers from unnecessary repetition (Billig, 2008). Fairclough (2008) used nominalization in CDA by writing about classes and categories “without variables which are not relevant” (p. 813) to the concerns of the research. It can

be used to help classify phenomena and create ideational metaphors that can be both necessary and appropriate in research (Billig, 2008; Martin, 2008).

On the other side of the argument, critics of nominalization are concerned that creating an abundance of technical terms that are impersonal, inanimate, and could be amassed as a form of capital (Billig, 2008). By taking away human and action elements, nominalization can become overly scientific and exclude readers and individuals not familiar with the technical terminology and abstractions (Fairclough, 2008). Billig (2008) expressed concern that researchers are too readily willing to create and use technical terms as labels for social and psychological processes. “We are ready to formulate labels and acronyms, not just as convenient shorthand, but as tools that can be used to promote our work as scientifically significant. The temptation is that we use nouns as if we had discovered things” (Billig, 2008, p. 840). Fairclough (2008) cautioned that it is not the use of nominalization that is problematic, but the self-awareness and self-reflection needed to recognize that it is occurring. “We should avoid using such language in problematic ways, not avoid using it completely” (Fairclough, 2008, p. 812).

### **The Field of Special Education**

Having emerged from a medical model, the field of special education is almost entirely engulfed in the theoretical perspective of positivism. The endless search for one clear *truth* is a hallmark of a positivist paradigm. This linear model of cognition has led to numerous dichotomous ideologies that underlie current social and professional practices. Dichotomous views such as normal/abnormal and hope/hopeless permeate the field.

## **Positivism**

The faults and problems in the field of special education are historical and myriad (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). For the last thirty years, special education has been a field battling with underlying epistemologies (Danforth, 2006; Paul, 2002). As a review of the history of disability studies demonstrated, special education was solidly founded in positivism. Paul (2002) described the positivist framework as seeing and valuing objective and empirical data obtained through logical statistical analysis. In contrast, while reviewing the literature surrounding case studies in the field of special education, Broderick (2009) noted that although some individuals credited high quality intervention and instruction for their success, many individuals indicated that the keys to educational success were factors, such as supportive and loving families and high expectations.

In 2009, Stamou and Padelidu conducted a critical discourse analysis study on the perceptions of pre-service teachers towards students with disabilities. Their findings indicated that special and general education professionals continued to be entrenched in the medical understanding of disability, which focused on impairment and reduced students from individuals to diagnostic categories. After conducting a critical discourse analysis of the special education referral process, Rogers (2003) found that, “in all of the perspectives, there was an assumption that testing was the answer if a student was not doing well.... The domain of school is defined by a paradigm of testing and measuring that replicates the scientific paradigm of positivism” (p. 153).

There those who wish to disrupt the historical precedent of positivism within the field of special education, and those strongly protecting and defending it. Some believe

that parents, policymakers, and professionals within the field hide from the uncertainty and ambiguity of difference by maintaining the normative assumptions of assigning students a category within special education (Liasidou, 2008). Some believe that defining disability as a social construction challenges established hierarchies to such an extent that the questions become too difficult to tackle and eventually draw too much attention away from useful research that would help teachers improve student performance (Danforth, 2006). And some believe that a positivist orientation is the only way to conduct reliable and reputable research. Kaufman and Brigham (1999) then-editors of the professional journal *Behavior Disorders* wrote,

Our conceptual orientation, like that of our predecessors, is scientific and positivistic. We believe this orientation best serves not only the profession but also the children and families for whom we advocate.... We will do our utmost to discriminate legitimate from nonlegitimate claims to knowledge. (p. 6)

Paul (2002) argued that these tensions and dissensions within the field draw professionals into debates that “have been, at times, lacking in scholarship, civility, or respect” (p. 79). While these arguments continue, research, such as the critical discourse analysis of behavioral referrals conducted by Nunkoosing and Kaydon-Laurel (2011), continued to demonstrate that professionals in the field of special education attempt to show their worthiness by drawing on the existing institutional and custodial discourses of the past. “Positivist hegemonies thickened and hardened to protect vested interests.... A foundation is not disrupted without everything it supports being in jeopardy” (Paul, 2002, p. 79).

## **Normalcy and Conformity**

A recurring theme throughout the literature of disability studies is the concept of disability as an individual deficit. “From the moment a child is born he/she emerges into a world where she/he receives messages that to be disabled is to be less than, a world where disability may be tolerated but in the final instance is inherently negative” (Campbell, 2008, p. 151). The traditional discourse depicts disability as a problem located within the person themselves, as a deficit and tragedy. Within educational systems difficulty with learning is seen as located within the student; it is seen as something that can be found and treated (Rogers, 2003; Stamou & Padeliadu, 2009). The dichotomous categories of normal and abnormal have gone largely unchallenged (Broderick, 2009). An example of this continuing discourse is the recent work within the field of autism, where the term *recovery* has established strong roots in the both the professional and parental communities.

Reiterating the concept that language cannot be considered neutral (Rogers et al., 2005), the use of the term recovery in numerous research studies surrounding the use of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) conducted by Lovaas in the 1980s and 1990s has left long lasting effects. In a critical discourse analysis study of families of children with autism, Broderick (2009) found that the term recovery did not neutrally describe a specific outcome; rather it constructed the framework through which parents understood their own perceptions of outcomes for young children with autism. He found that the salient issue was that



engagement with this discursive construct of recovery relies on and reinscribes particular ideological beliefs about the nature of disability and the constructs of normal and abnormal. Autism is constructed as a disability, certainly, but one from which one may recover and gain (or regain) the invisible privilege of the status of normalcy. (Broderick, 2009, p. 275)

Lovaas and his colleague Scott Wright (2006) acknowledged that the language use in the ABA studies has been controversial. They argued that “much time and energy has been devoted to whether the term ‘recovered’ should have been used” (p. 235), unnecessarily detracting from the validity of their work. Regardless of intentions, recovery has become a powerful construct that appears to describe an optimal, albeit normal, level of participation in ordinary life.

The desire for normalcy has directed practices within the field for disabilities and supported pressure for conformity. Gartner and Lipsky (1987) argued that every time a child is identified as abnormal and sent off to a special education classroom, “the children who are left in the regular classroom receive a message: no one is above suspicion; everyone is being watched by the authorities; nonconformity is dangerous” (p. 383). Special educators are seen as workers attempting to assimilate children into normal life and resistance is subsequently labeled as challenging or disruptive (Nunkoosing & Haydon-Laurel, 2011). Citizenship in the larger school community and the compensation of social acceptance and belonging are awarded, according to Danforth (2006), only after the individuals are able to achieve bodily or social conformity. Quoting an autobiography of a parent of a student with autism, Broderick wrote:

What, in the end, are you fighting for: Normal? Is normal possible? Can it be defined? Is it best achieved by holing up in the offices of therapists, in special education classrooms, in isolated exercises, in simulating living, while everyday 'normal' happens casually on the other side of the wall? And is normal superior to what the child inherently is, to what he aspires to, fights to become, every second of his day? (Kephart, 1998, p. 11, as cited in Broderick, 2009, p. 276)

### **The Power of Policy**

The field of special education is riddled with a history of legislation and litigation. Like many other traditionally oppressed persons, individuals who are differently abled have successfully used the court system to advocate for equality and social justice.

**The evolution of disability legislation.** Despite the continuing debates, the education for children with disabilities has traveled a long journey and made great progress in the last 40 years. Prior to the implementation of Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975) more than one million children with disabilities were entirely excluded from the educational system. Those children with disabilities who were being served had very limited access and were denied a free and appropriate education (Education for All Handicapped Children, 1975; U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2007). Historians generally consider the passage of P.L. 94-142 a direct result of other significant case law interpretations. Gartner and Lipsky (1987) wished to highlight three main points surrounding the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483) and the impact on children with disabilities:

1. to note the importance of education to the "life and minds" of children,

2. to set the framework concerning the inherent inequality of separate education, and
3. to recognize that advocacy efforts in the 1960s and 1970s on behalf of persons with disabilities were drawn from the context of the Civil Rights movement. (p. 368)

One of the strategies the disability rights movement learned was how to create change in policies and practices through litigation and legislation (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987).

Parents of children with disabilities took the lead in the litigation and legislative strategy. Two key decisions, *Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth* (334 F. Supp. 1257) in 1971 and *Mills v. Board of Education* (348 F. Supp. 866) in 1972 rejected school district reasons for excluding students with handicapping decisions and essentially declared that denying them an education amounted to a violation of equal rights protection under the fourteenth amendment (Beratan, 2006; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). The passage of P.L. 94-142, now commonly referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was essentially the government's way of encapsulating the increasing case law precedents into statute (Beratan, 2006).

The original Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 had four primary purposes:

- To assure that all children with disabilities have available to them...a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs.

- To assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents...are protected.
- To assist States and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities.
- To assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities. (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2007)

Beratan (2006) emphasized that IDEA is primarily a funding bill. States which accept the IDEA monies must adhere to certain principles. Included in those principles are discursive concepts, such as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). It does not attempt to define disability or handicap, but rather it defines a *child with a disability* as one with an identified handicapping condition that requires special education services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

**Language use within policy.** Liasidou (2008) wrote, “Policies do not exist in a vacuum; they reflect underlying ideologies and assumptions in a society, and it is indeed these ideologies that construe the dynamism that underpins inclusive education policymaking” (p. 485). Since these are locations where issues of social dominance and inequality typically occur, researchers who use CDA favor analyzing institutionalized forms of writing and talking (Stamou & Padeliadu, 2009). “Special education policymaking, as part of social life, is fraught with hegemonic struggles that saturate its philosophical tenets and practices. These hegemonic struggles constitute the various discourses as they are represented by powerful social actors” (Liasidou, 2008, p. 487). Researchers such as Beratan (2006), Gartner and Lipsky (1987), Liasidou (2008), and

Rafal (2009) have viewed IDEA through a critical lens, particularly the concept of LRE and the resulting discourse surrounding the socially constructed and powerful term *inclusion*.

When considering class as a social construct, individuals with disabilities constitute a social class that has been oppressed by the dominant class of those conforming to the social construct of normal (Broderick, 2009; Nunkoosing & Haydon-Laurel, 2011). Rafal (2009) suggested that this same argument be applied to inclusive education. Through that lens prevailing social norms in the field of special education such as mainstreaming, pullout services, specialist techniques, or treatment approaches are portrayed as neither natural nor inevitable, but as created phenomena derived from complex social roots such as institutionalization. “IDEA might be about civil rights.... It is an improvement on the institutions it shut down, but being an improvement on institutionalization is hardly a grandiose claim” (Beratan, 2006, p. 3).

Rafal (2009) acknowledged that special education faces many dilemmas. Struggling to teach students with disabilities in a hegemonic system that at the same time oppresses them, makes terms like inclusion extremely complicated. IDEA requires that students with disabilities be educated in the regular classroom environment “to the maximum extent appropriate” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Beratan (2006) suggested that looking again at the “phrase ‘to the maximum extent appropriate,’ it becomes clear that its intended interpretation is ‘to the maximum extent appropriate to an individual’s deficit.’ This is one example of how IDEA sends a form of ableism into the educational system” (p. 3). This assimilationist approach establishes an

instant hierarchy between those being assimilated who are less than those for whom the system was originally intended (Beratan, 2006). Liasidou (2008) suggested that “The power of language and its multifarious configurations constitute an immense, albeit an opaque, discursive impediment that, unless deconstructed, will continue to undermine and subvert any attempts toward inclusion” (p. 485).

This review previously established the term ableism as an example of nominalization. In this same vein, inclusive education has been moved to the term inclusion through the LRE discourse and nominalization in IDEA, as though it represents an actual noun (Billig, 2008). Many other technical terms and new vocabulary emerged as a result of IDEA, not the least of which are the numerous categories and special education labels imposed on the educational system to describe individuals whose learning trajectories differ from the dominant discourse of normalcy, but also to price those labels for funding purposes (Liasidou, 2008).

Occurring parallel to nominalization is the also omnipresent process of *reification*. York and Clark (2006) define reification as “the process of treating as a real entity something that is in fact an abstract concept” (p. 9). They argue that one of the primary measures for whether or not an individual has a disability, the intelligence quotient (IQ), is in fact a reification of a social construct. In their review of Gould’s 1996 edition of the seminal work *The Mismeasure of Man*, York and Clark (2006) took issue with psychometric tests and advocates of the notion that intelligence is a one dimensional and measurable feature of the brain.

Those guilty of reifying IQ argue that there is a general underlying intellectual ability in each of us, *g*, that is measured reasonably well by IQ tests, in spite of the evidence suggesting that *g* is a product of the tests themselves, a statistical creation, not a genuine mental attribute. (p. 9)

Yet these psychometric tests are the primary tools used to build and select labels and categories for children, continuing the dominance of the medical model within special education. Sleeter (2010) warned that by accepting these nominalized categories for children, we are also accepting ideology about what schools are for, how society should be structured, and what the normal should look and be like. Rather, we should view “customary categorical divisions of humanity with tremendous skepticism” (Danforth 2006), critiquing them in light of how they contribute to equality and kindness in our daily activities.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

The work of critical researchers is to move beyond describing *what is*, with the intention of describing *what could be* by uncovering beliefs and practices that limit human freedom and democracy (Crotty 2003; Glesne, 2011). Glesne (2011) described critical researchers as those who make frequent use of what she calls *standpoint epistemologies*. “Standpoint epistemologies are positioned in the experiences, values, and interests of a group that has traditionally been oppressed or excluded. From those standpoints, researchers critique and reconstruct narratives of dominant groups” (Glesne, 2011, p. 10). Conducting language analysis from a critical perspective means analyzing

how language is being used as a cultural tool to mediate relationships of power and privilege within interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge (Rogers et al., 2005).

CDA is a relatively new theoretical and methodological approach to research. It rose to prominence in the 1990s after a small network of scholars including Tuen van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, and Ruth Wodak spent two days together at a symposium in Amsterdam in 1991 (Wodak, 2001). In 1997, Fairclough and Wodak put forth an eight-point program to define critical discourse analysis.

1. CDA addresses social problems.
2. Power relations are discursive.
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture.
4. Discourse does ideological work.
5. Discourse is historical.
6. The link between text and society is mediated.
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory.
8. Discourse is a form of social action.

CDA, then, aims to “explore the relationships between discursive practices, events, and texts....And there is an emphasis on highlighting how such practices and texts are ideologically shaped by relations of power” (Taylor, 2004, p. 435).

Fairclough (1995) instructed critical discourse analysts to focus their work upon specifically identified social institutions and upon discourses clearly associated with those institutions, rather than on casual conversation. “Institutions construct their



ideological and discursal subjects; they construct them in the sense that they impose ideological and discursal constraints upon them” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 39). Most analysts agree and support the position that discourses become *ordered* by the social institutions that created them. These orders, or continually shifting boundaries, reflect the ideologies of those in power (Fairclough, 1995; Rogers et al., 2005, Wodak, 2001).

Another important aspect of CDA is the understanding that discourse and text is never the work of one person (Wodak, 2001). Social institutions may have two or more identifiable ideologies. “This diversity of ideological formations is a consequence of, and a condition for, struggles between different forces within the institution: that is, conflict between forces results in ideological barriers between them” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 40). Such is the case in disabilities studies between the theoretical view of disability in the medical model and disability viewed as a social construct. A primary goal of CDA is to expose and create awareness of these ideological positions and their influence on the language and discourse that has become so naturalized within a social institution that participants are largely unaware of possible oppressive power elements (Fairclough, 1995).

There are some language analysts who take issue with the critical perspective being applied to discourse analysis. From a pragmatic perspective, individuals need to be able to communicate and potential words choices must be made. Widdowson (2002) cautioned that,

No two human beings ever send the same signals, never mean exactly the same thing, but to all social intents and purposes they have to make believe that they

do. People have to conspire to co-operate by ignoring linguistic particulars and adjusting to a level of common and approximate understanding if they want to engage in public discourse at all. Any analysis of the textual products of this public discourse needs to recognize that it is, of its very nature, co-operatively co-constructed in this way. One can only assign social significance to such texts by being correspondingly co-operative by converging on some set of social values.

(p. 164)

In other words, Widdowson has challenged the concept that there are always power relationships at play within discourse. He argued that sometimes individuals have private value systems and personal meanings that cannot be detected and uncovered by viewing language through (what he considered a biased perspective) a critical lens.

### **Conclusion**

Widdowson's point notwithstanding, students with disabilities represent not only a historically oppressed population, they are a vulnerable population. In areas of learning and scholarship, they are measured, labeled, and then viewed as outside of the norms of society (Paul, 2002; York & Clark, 2006). Individuals with disabilities are underrepresented in the field of scholarly research and advocacy (Rafal, 2009). Although Fairclough argued for the benefits of a bottom-up approach to tackling serious problems of language and power (i.e., woman leading the feminist movements, African-Americans leading the civil rights movement), it seems impractical or unlikely that change will come directly as a result of actions from the children being subjected to domination. Liasidou (2008) argued that a top-down approach is sometimes the more appropriate method.

Practitioners need to be empowered in order to interrogate and disassemble the pervasive effects of language on their pedagogies and their discursive embodiments which are accountable for the multitude of exclusionary and oppressive educational practices. This critical and reflexive stance has the potential to ‘destabilize’ and ultimately subvert the well-entrenched discourse of disability. (Liasidou, 2008, p. 496)

In order for special education practitioners to seek greater democracy in schools, they must bring critical attention to the markers and identities that create and maintain inequality (Danforth, 2006). “It is time our educational system moves forward and views educational inequity and exclusion as failures of our whole system, which demands systemic reforms that will force schools to change their structures, policies and attitudes” (Rafal, 2009). Based on a review of the literature, a critical discourse analysis of the impact of current educational reforms and legislation on the inclusive practices and attitudes towards students with disabilities is warranted. “The current position of special education cannot be questioned unless the language supporting this reality is fundamentally challenged” (Liasiou, 2008).

The literature in this chapter established the saliency of the questions and methods for this study. In Chapter Three, the specific procedures of this investigation are explained. Chapter Four covers the results of the study. Chapter Five focuses on an emergent theory arising from the results. Chapter Six describes implications for practice and research and links the significance of this study to knowledge and policy in the fields of special education and school leadership.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHOD

#### **Introduction**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) does not provide a ready-made formulaic approach to research. Each study must have a solid theoretical basis for a particular social issue in order to select which discourses and social structures to analyze (van Dijk, 2001). Determining concrete methods for data collection and analysis depend on the properties and context of the particular investigation. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods and data analysis techniques that were implemented to investigate the following research questions for this proposal.

Does the LRE clause of the IDEA 2004 create or reinforce institutional ableism?

- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within case law interpretations and federal regulations related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices in the LRE section of the South Carolina Office of Exceptional Children Process Guide?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within a selected urban district's policies and guidelines related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices found in face-to-face interviews with five traditional elementary school principals?

The chapter is organized into five main sections: method, data, positionality, data collection, and data analysis. The method section offers a description of CDA and a justification for its selection, a theory for the role discourse plays in society and within this study, and also, a concrete structural theory of how discourse research may be organized and analyzed. In the positionality section I explain and define my own perceived bias and discourse position within the research. The data analysis section lists procedures for data collection and the participant selection steps. Also included here is a process for the analysis of each discourse unit or text iterated with slight variations for each text selection. Finally, a discussion of triangulation to ensure trustworthiness of interpretation completes this chapter.

### **Method**

Over the last 20 years, methods for CDA have developed under close scrutiny and criticism by traditional linguists and conversational analysts (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Widdowson, 2002). While the field of study continues to grow, there has yet to be any consensus on recommended methods of data analysis. Prominent researchers in the field such as Fairclough, Wodak, Gee, Meyer, Jager, and van Dijk have each developed their own variations of CDA. A synthesized version of three of the variations of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Jager, 2001; van Dijk, 2001) along with Saldaña's (2009) recommendations for coding qualitative data were adapted to this work. These sources were selected as relevant both for the research questions and for nascent nature of this line of inquiry. Integrating similar items and allowing the methods to supplement each

other offered a solid analytic framework that both addressed some known limitations of CDA while setting an adequate structure for this research.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

CDA combines the study of discourse analysis with a critical theory perspective. Because there are numerous variations of CDA, it is important to clearly identify what is meant by both *critical* and *discourse* in this proposal. A full description of what is meant by *discourse* is addressed first, followed by a description of the modifying term *critical*.

**Definition of discourse.** Discourse has become an all-encompassing term, meant to capture the total and semiotic connotations of culture, the notions of hegemony and ideology, various linguistic theories, and the historical perspective on the relationship between knowledge and power (Sawyer, 2002). It is not surprising then that there is confusion and conflict associated with the meaning behind such an all-encompassing term. Sawyer (2002) suggested that this was simply too much weight for any theory to place on a single word. van Dijk (2001) compared discourse to an iceberg in that specific portions that are expressed represent a vastly larger implicit sociocultural common ground and knowledge base. For this study, discourse referred to ways of constructing or referring to knowledge about a particular topic or domain of practice and the ideas and texts associated with that practice (Leistyna, 2001). Primarily for the purposes of this study, the term discourse was used to indicate language as a form of social practice. Language can be expressed or referred to as *text*. Texts were considered by Fairclough (1995) to be barometers of social practices, movements, and diversities. They can be

either written or spoken, and can consist of any linguistic representation or artifact, such as a picture, a building, or a music composition (Fairclough, 1995).

**Definition of critical.** The descriptive term critical (when used in the adjective form) is closely associated with the active verb *critique* (or to examine critically) (Fairclough, 1995). For the purpose of this dissertation, the act of critique was “essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things” (Wodak, 2001, p. 2). Jager (2001) argued that discourses can be criticized and by doing so, researchers can reveal their contradictions and uncover their relationships with knowledge and power. Discourses are never neutral and are always embedded in social context (Rogers et al., 2005). The systematic critique of discourse makes visible the “social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text” (Wodak, 2001, p. 3).

**Support for selection of CDA.** A critical analysis of discourse focuses on how language is used as a tool to mediate relationships of power and privilege in social actions, institutions, and knowledge (Rogers et al., 2005). But language is not a powerful tool on its own. It becomes powerful by the way people use it (Wodak, 2001). “Critical discourse analysis, then, aims to explore the relationships between discursive practices, events, and texts.... CDA explores how texts construct representations of the world, social relationships, and social identities” (Taylor, 2004, p. 435).

Fairclough (1995) argued for an intimate relationship between people’s critical awareness of the power of language and the development of their own language abilities and practices. For education, practitioners need to become empowered to critique the pervasive effects that language has on their pedagogies and discursive practices that

could be responsible for multitudes of exclusionary and oppressive practices in the field (Liasidou, 2008). The emerging field of disability studies should therefore prioritize goals to reveal the discourses that reproduce disability as an oppressive category (Grue, 2011). Both Danforth (2006) and Rafal (2009) made pleas for the field to bring critical attention to the social structures, policies, attitudes and ideologies that operate to create and maintain social inequality and create barriers for inclusive educational practices. Currently, there is lack of critical research that investigates and reveals the ties between discursive practices and social structures in the field of special education (Grue, 2011; Rogers et al., 2005). Therefore, CDA was selected as the best method to explore answers to the research questions for this study.

### **Socio-Cognitive Analysis Theory**

Reconciling the theories that ground different methodologies with the actual methods that supposedly follow from those theories is a significant undertaking for any research project (Korobov, 2001). Rogers et al. (2005) urged all CDA researchers to attend to a) the relationships and links between the micro and macro, b) explanations of the inclusion or exclusion of certain linguistic resources within the analysis, and c) establishing clear analytic procedures and decision making responsibilities of the researcher. The method for this study was based on a bi-level approach. The purpose of the first level was to establish a foundation for the relationship between discourse and society. This study was founded on van Dijk's (2001) socio-cognitive approach to discourse analysis. Socio-cognitive discourse analysis emphasizes "the fundamental importance of the study of cognition (and not only that of society) in the critical analysis



of discourse, communication and interaction” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 97). Figure 3.1 is a graphic representation of the envisioned the socio-cognitive approach to analysis within this study.

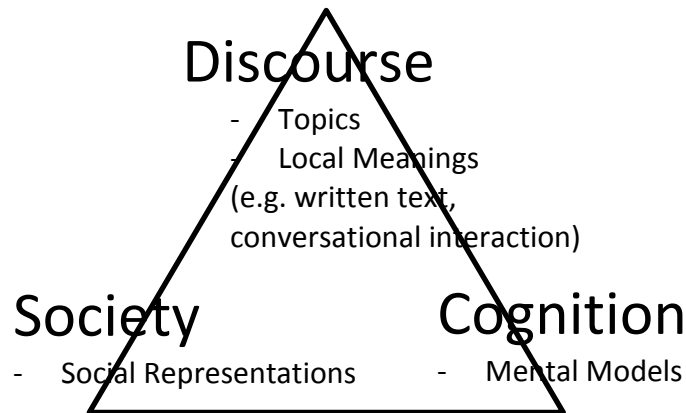


Figure 3.1. Graphic representation of relationship between discourse, society, and cognition.

This model is similar to Fairclough’s (1995) popular triad model of social practice, discourse practice, and text. A full description of each component and how Fairclough’s (1995) model can supplement understanding is provided below.

**Discourse.** For this study, discourse was meant in the broad sense of any communicative event, including “conversational interaction, written text, as well as associated gestures, facework, typographical layout, images and any other ‘semiotic’ or multimedia dimension of signification” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 98). The definition can be compared to the text component of Fairclough’s (1995) model. It is representative of the communication put forward at the exposed portion of van Dijk’s (2001) iceberg, or in the case of this study, the documents and interview transcripts. In this sense, discourse can be broken down into two main elements of topic and local meaning.

Topics are considered a semantic macrostructures and they represent what a discourse is globally speaking about. Topics embody the most critical information of a discourse and explain the overall coherence. As such, they cannot be directly observed but are inferred from or assigned to discourse by the user. They can, however, be “expressed in discourse, for instance in titles, headlines, summaries, abstracts, thematic sentences or conclusions” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 102). Because the topic provides an overall idea of what the discourse is about, it controls other aspects of the text and analysis. Therefore it is the recommended starting point for the discourse analysis.

As social actors, people engage in public discourse or the cooperative achievement of creating social meanings (Widdowson, 2002). The local forms of those cooperative interactions include sentences and formal relationships between clauses or sentences in sequences (ordering, pronominal relations, active-passive voice, nominalizations, and other formal properties), lexical meanings, and rhetoric (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001).

Local meanings are the result of the selection made by speakers or writers in their mental models of events or their more general, socially shared beliefs. At the same time, they are the kind of information that (under the overall control of global topics) most directly influences the mental models, and hence the opinions and attitudes of recipients. Together with topics, these meanings are the best recalled and most easily reproduced by recipients, and hence may have the most obvious social consequences. (van Dijk, 2001, p. 103)

**Cognition.** For this study, cognition involves “both personal as well as social cognition, beliefs and goals as well as evaluations and emotions, and any other ‘mental’ or ‘memory’ structures, representations or processes involved in discourse and interaction” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 98). Jager (2001) was convinced that it is not the speech/text/discourse that moves the world. He liberated himself from linguistics that was not based on thought and consciousness; he subordinated language to the thoughts and conditions that result from cognitive human activity (Jagar, 2001). Weber (2002) argued that context is first and foremost cognitive. In this sense, we always create the context for any text by drawing inferences based on our background knowledge, attitudes and emotions. Understanding a discourse means being able to construct a mental model for it. Mental models explain how a discourse has both personal and social properties, and how in the same social situation each discourse is different. “Mental models not only present personal beliefs, but also (often personal versions of) social representations, such as knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, which in turn are related to the structure of groups and organizations” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 113). Mental models are similar to discourse practice in Fairclough’s (1995) model which represents how different groups make meaning of text within their given domain. For this study, the cognitive construction of mental models within which people make meaning assisted in analyzing various texts across possibly different domains of practice (i.e. regulatory text and administrators who have various levels of instructional experience and background).

**Society.** For this study, society was meant to include both the local, microstructures of face-to-face interactions, “as well as the more global, society and

political structures variously defined in terms of groups, group-relations (such as dominance and inequality), movements, institutions, organizations, social processes, political systems and more abstract properties of societies and cultures” (van Dijk, 2001, 98). It is through our mental models that we particularize social representations. Social representations are composed of our knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies. Fairclough (1995) cautioned that ideologies may become naturalized (i.e. seen to be commonsensical and based in the nature of things rather than in the interests of a particular group) and thereby unconsciously become part of a commonly accepted knowledge base rather than discursively created social representations. People use discourse in powerful ways, often without realizing the extent to which their ordinary and commonly accepted actions might contribute to maintaining societal inequalities (Billig, 2008). The primary objective of CDA is to reveal how these hidden ideologies are at work within the social representations we construct from our mental models, which are informed and fed by dominant discourse. The social representation concept used in this study is largely synonymous with social practices in Fairclough’s (1995) model.

### **Structural Theory**

An important component of CDA includes an analysis of the ways discursive practices occur inside existing structures and societal places (Leistyna, 2001). For this study, Jager’s (2001) structural theory of analysis provided a framework for understanding the theoretical places where discourses occur and a sequence for the data analysis. Figure 3.2 provides a graphic representation of how the structural theory was conceptualized for this study. The structural model of CDA by Jager (2001) includes

levels and elements of discourse. “Overall society discourse presents a particularly entwined and interdependently deeply rooted knot. Discourse analysis has the aim of untangling this net and proceed as a rule by first working out the individual discourse on

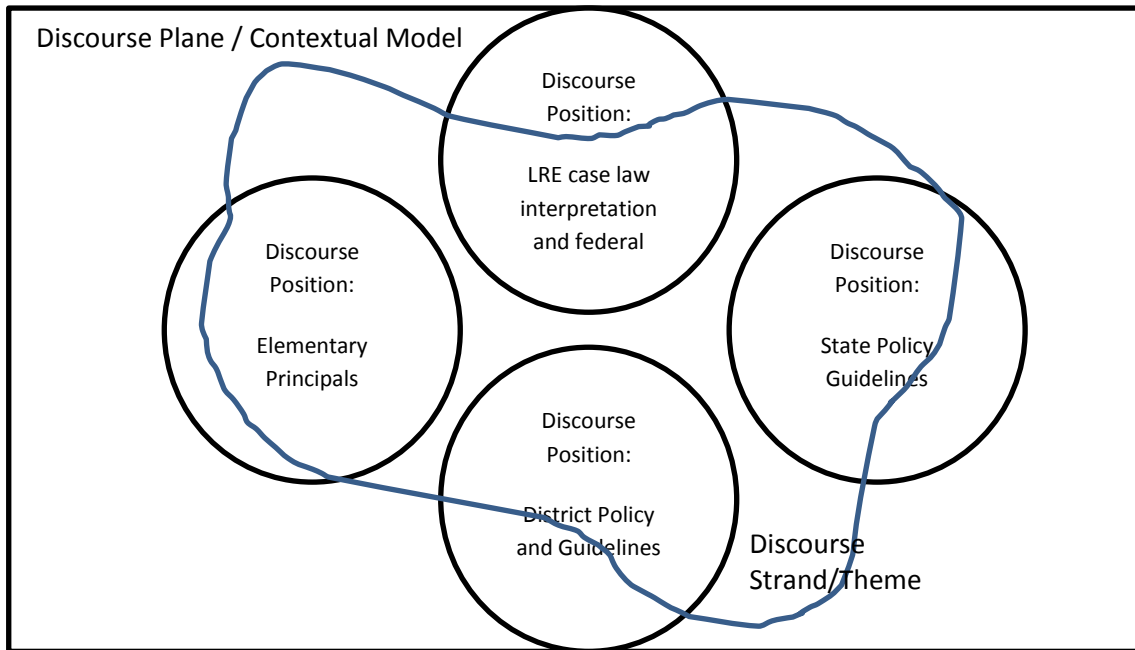


Figure 3.2. A graphic representation of the structural theory of discourse.

individual discourse planes” (Jager, 2001, p. 50). Discourse planes and the other unique elements of discourse structure (along with their synonymous counterparts from other popular CDA theories) are presented below.

**Discursive plane and context model.** Dominate structures stabilize and naturalize the effects of power and ideology within the production of discourse (Wodak, 2001). Discourse planes represent various platforms within which different discourse strands localize meaning. Discourse planes are broad and provide a local context (i.e., education, science, administration, etc.). “Such discourse planes could also be called societal locations from which ‘speaking’ happens” (Jager, 2001, p. 49). The local context

of the discourse plane is defined by properties of the immediate situation in which the communicative event occurs. Some properties of a situation include the domain of discourse (Fairclough, 1995) such as special education, overall actions such as legislation, participants in their various positions, along with participants intentions, goals, knowledge, and ideologies. This overall dominate structure constrains the properties of the discourse (van Dijk, 2001). The context of discourse planes are generated by mental representations of participants. The context services to

control many of the properties of the discourse production and understanding, such as genre, topic choice, local meanings and coherence, on the one hand, but also speech acts, style and rhetoric on the other hand. Indeed, style may be defined as the set of formal properties of discourse that are a function of context models, such as lexicalization, word ordering and intonation. (van Dijk, 2001, p. 109)

This model allows for subjective interpretations of social situations and differences in language choices between participants in the same situation. In other words, it is the mental representations of various participants at work within a discourse plane that constrain their text. For example, age, race, gender, or knowledge properties of participants will influence their text within a particular situation or discourse plane.

**Discursive strands and themes.** Societal discourse within a given plane generally contains a variety of themes. Jager (2001) refers to thematically uniform discourses as discourse strands. A text usually makes reference to various discourse strands that emerge in a generally entangled form. CDA is used to untangle discourse

strands. By recording frequencies of particular properties of discourse fragments, particular arguments and themes will emerge. These themes represent a different strand within the discourse text. Strands can be used to identify other elements that may influence the power relationships, such as discursive events. Identifying elements, such as discourse events, is important for the analysis of discourse strands. Events are historical occurrences exist in the mental representations of participants and exert influence over discourse strands. For example, the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind) of 2001 may stand out as an important discursive event politically. And more specific to this study, the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 with virtually no change to the fundamental term, LRE, also represents a historical and political discursive moment.

**Discourse fragments and rhetoric.** There are approaches to CDA that focus on textually oriented analysis and some that choose to focus entirely on the historical and social context of discourse (Fairclough, 1995p; Taylor, 2004). The methods for this study include significant emphasis on the lexical components of text, or what Jager (2001) refers to as discourse fragments. Each discourse strand contains multitudes of elements. Any element of a text that deals directly with a certain theme is considered a discourse fragment. In other words, discourse strands are composed of a collection of discourse fragments.

Discourse fragments are identified through textual analysis. The field of linguistic or textual analysis has produced, over many decades, hundreds if not thousands of discernible units, moves, devices, and other structures within discourse (van Dijk,

2001). For any CDA project, the researcher must make deliberate and meaningful choices when selecting structures for closer analysis on any social issue. The choices the researcher makes in the selection of options constituting meaning potentials is similar to the choices made within the discourse by participants and text. These choices include both inclusion and exclusion of any meaning potential. What lexical variations did the participant or text choose to include or exclude? What did the researcher choose to include or exclude in the analysis? Beyond semiotic structures, what other structures of the text that were less consciously controllable, such as intonation, syntactic structures, propositional structures, rhetorical figures, and spontaneous talk properties were present or absent (Fairclough, 1995; Jager, 2001; van Dijk, 2001)? According to van Dijk (2001),

We have some theoretically based practical guidelines to decide which discourse structures to study among many hundreds of others.... The point is that such a choice is twice context-bound: firstly by our own (scholarly) aims, our research problems, the expectations of our readers, as well as the social relevance of our research project and secondly, by the relevance of specific discourse structures studies in their own context, such as the aims and beliefs of the speaker or the recipients, the social roles, positions, and relations of participants, institutional constraints, and so on. (p. 106)

### **Data**

Fairclough (1995), Jager (2001), and Wodak (2001) each caution researchers to define a restricted element of a discourse for a research study. Discourses have histories,



presents, and futures. The analysis of a complete discourse process in order to reveal their full strength and entanglements would be enormous and could only be approached through a large number of single projects (Jager, 2001). Studying the presence or absence of ableism within IDEA would require a broader historical and participant context than is possible for this project. To define a specific project, Jager (2001) recommends making a synchronic cut through the discourse strands, thereby defining a particular point in time. For this study, a synchronic cut will be made through the present and currently operating discourse. Four different discourse positions have been selected for analysis and are represented graphically in Figure 3.3.

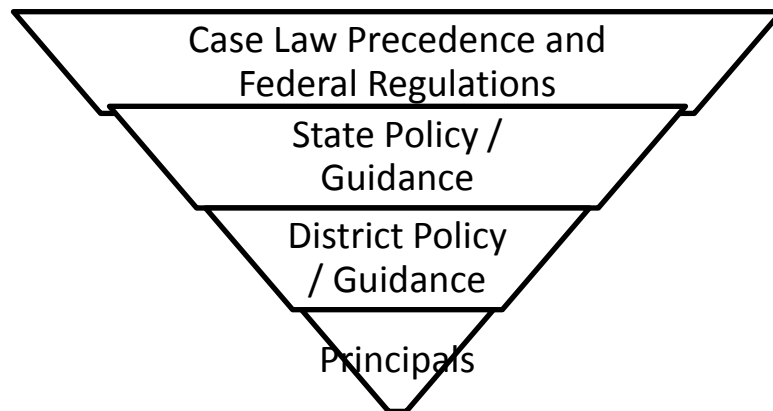


Figure 3.3. A graphic representation of discourse positions.

A discourse position refers to the “specific ideological location of a person or medium” (Jager, 2001, p. 49). The first three discourse positions are static data sources from various documents. The first discourse position is considered legislative or regulatory at the federal level, the second discourse position is considered procedural at the state level, the third discourse position is considered procedural at the district level, and the fourth

discourse position is considered interactional based on perceptions and interpretations of interviews at the local level.

The socially embedded positionality in CDA is not just a caution for the purposes of analysis. The salient location of the researcher is critical to testing the trustworthiness of CDA interpretations.

### **Positionality Statement**

The identification of social representations located into discourse fragments is an interpretative exercise that will be influenced by the researcher (Fairclough, 1995). Jager (2001) cautioned that any researcher conducting CDA must clearly see that their own critique is not located outside of the discourse being analyzed. The analysis may reveal the researcher's own mental models and social representations that have been constructed as a result of many historical discourse processes. It is therefore critical that I clearly identify my own position within the discourse. The purpose of this section is to identify how my own positionality may have affected the research as well as how the research may be perceived within the larger education community. I identify myself and key components of my background and history to establish my discussion positions of both practitioner and researcher.

### **Discourse Positions**

Within the context of this study I occupy two discourse positions, researcher and practitioner. As a researcher I am a doctoral student in educational leadership pursuing completion of my culminating project, the dissertation. In this position I have prioritized knowledge acquisition and the synthesis of what is considered valid and acceptable

research in the field. As a practitioner, I have been working in the field of PreK-12 special education for 18 years. Ten of those years were spent as in teacher position within a large urban district. For the last eight years I have served in a special education administrator position within two urban districts in two different states. During this time my professional practice was thoroughly engulfed by the positivist paradigm that permeates the field of special education. As a consequence, I am fluent in special education's professional and technical terminology. I have participated in the categorization of children. During the interviews, I recognized similarities from my experiences in the participants' expressions of their work. I felt empathy for participants as they described their desire to help meet the needs of the students they were charged with educating. My inclination was to feel a collegial identification with their words. That sense of collegiality heightened as well as burdened my critical analysis of the texts.

It is also important to note my achievements within the field of special education and how my own discourse position may have impacted the study. Throughout my career, I have been promoted to positions of greater responsibility and power within the field. I have held the following positions of increased authority: High School Department Chairperson, Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Specialist, Coordinator for Preschool Special Education Programs, and Compliance and Monitoring Coordinator. Currently I serve as the Director for Special Education within a large urban school district. I have looked at the identification and placement of students with disabilities through multiple lenses and have been held responsible for ensuring that my employer has a continuum of services available to all students and that district personnel have the knowledge and

expertise necessary to make educational recommendations. These roles and responsibilities present challenges in the intent and meaning of professional practices.

I have experienced frustration at feeling unable to create meaningful change in how students with disabilities are perceived and are relegated to separate locations within schools. Given my district's inability to fill all special education teaching positions, I have seen special education positions occupied by people not fully qualified for the field, and also met some who, though credentialed, lack nuanced professional judgment about serving all students needs. I have been frustrated with the degree to which school administrators defer the instructional leadership for students with disabilities to district level special education personnel and their reliance on special education teachers as experts in instructional matters (Bays & Crockett, 2007). These are frustrations of daily professional practice that I carry with me. For this study, I had to be very aware of these tacit reactions during both my data collection and my analysis of the data.

Although I have just begun exploring the challenges of occupying both positions of scholar and practitioner, I have perceived a marginalization of my role as researcher within the university community because of my concurrent role as practitioner (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Anderson & Jones, 2000). I have interpreted various university discourses that I believe prioritize work conducted by doctoral students who do not hold concurrent practitioner positions and who may serve as graduate assistants. These discourses included structured opportunities to share scholarly works were consistently scheduled during the traditional work day, excluding any students who may hold conflicting practitioner positions. It also included various interactions between university faculty

and graduate assistants during courses, implying a strong familiarity to the exclusion of less familiar practitioner students. Because of my role as a practitioner, I faced additional obstacles when attempting to propose sites for the interview portions of this study that I may not have encountered had I only occupied the role of scholar. As examples of these obstacles, I had to consider the power differentials of my job versus my scholarship and could not use the most accessible research site given my professional authority among those potential participants. Also, when attempting access in a more remotely sited potential urban district, I experienced gatekeeping by practitioners who may have been worried more about my professional role and its implications than they might have if my sole affiliation had been as a university-based scholar. I believe it is necessary for me to acknowledge these interpretations of marginalization and establish how my own mental models and social representations impact my research methodology and positionality. Throughout the stages of this study, my positionality affected the data collection process, its analysis, and the results.

### **Data Collection Process**

The data collection process consisted of obtaining relevant policy documents at multiple levels and then interview data with selected participants who play an important policy role. All data was collected over 12 months and updated as appropriate. For example, some documents may have been collected during the second month of the process, but needed to be replaced when an updated version was made available in the tenth month of the process. This section includes a full description of the methods used to gather the data.

## **Document Data Collection**

Four different searches were conducted in order to collect documents for textual analysis. All of the statute, regulatory, and guidance documents collected were available freely online. The title of each document collected is available in Appendix B. First, a search of seminal case law interpretations of LRE in the federal court system was conducted. Relevant case law interpretations were searched and collected using LexisNexis. LexisNexis provides access to searchable documents from legal, news, and business sources (“LexisNexis: About Us”, 2013). The search domain was restricted to legal cases and by searching topics using the term “least restrictive environment.” The search produced a large list of legal cases that were then filtered for only those cases which occurred within the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court, the circuit that governs the interview participants’ selected urban school district. The filtering process produced a total of 11 cases for further inspection. Each of these cases involved individual students (or their appropriate guardian) in legal contention with a public school district. The cases were reviewed in greater depth to determine if LRE was the primary, secondary, or tertiary issue at stake for the student in question. Five of the 11 cases were determined to be focused primarily on the student’s educational placement, or LRE. A table including key information from each of these cases is provided in Appendix B.

The second search included federal IDEA 2004 legislation and regulations issued by the Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) which specify current definitions and interpretations related to LRE. The third search included the participating district’s state regulations pertaining to the education of students with

disabilities under IDEA and the most recently issued iteration of the *Process Guide* (Office of Exceptional Children, 2013) for any references to the LRE requirement. The Process Guide was a document designed to provide interpretative information for Local Educational Agencies implementing the regulations. All sections referencing LRE became part of the documents collected for analysis.

The fourth search was conducted at the district level. During my initial and follow-up discussions with the district's Director of Special Education Services I requested any document that may guide school administrators or teachers in understanding the LRE clause of IDEA. I also sought documents from the interviewees.

### **Interview Data Collection**

Based on the analysis of the collected documents, a final interview protocol was completed. Unless the researcher is a seasoned interviewer, both Glesne (2011) and Brenner (2006) recommended using a structured or semi-structured approach to interviews that incorporates an interview protocol. A conversational approach to the interview questions was adopted to ensure that the discourse was driven by the participants rather than the structure of the protocol (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Wolcott, 1999). Two grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) were used to elicit the participants' understanding of the concept of LRE. The advantage of a grand tour question stems from its roots in cognitive anthropology where providing a broad opportunity for the participants to talk allows their language to lead the researcher deeper into their vocabulary and details of the participants' views (Brenner, 2006). In short, the grand tour alerts the researcher to the pervading discourse of the participants, and thus,

the researcher's subsequent questions are tailored for the participants' language and environment.

Glesne furthered her recommendations by stating that interviews should pre-pilot and pilot the questions prior to beginning the actual data collection process. The pre-pilot process included allowing peers or experts to review the questions in light of the study purpose and provide feedback/suggestions. In the pilot phase, I practiced conducting the interview using the protocol with individuals from the same discourse position from a different school district. The protocol required no revision based on the document analysis prior to the next phase of this research project. The final interview protocol is available in the Appendix A.

To address local positionality and interactional meaning of LRE, the object of this study, five face-to-face interviews with elementary school principals were conducted. Because it is impossible to include all participants involved in the specific subject of any study, researchers need a justifiable strategy for selecting study participants (Glesne, 2011). Elementary principals were selected because a) elementary schools represent the first educational opportunity for schools to implement inclusive instructional practices, and b) students are largely identified with educational disabilities under IDEA during the elementary years. Five interviews were conducted to ensure internal triangulation of data within this discourse position.

The study occurred in a large, urban district within the southeastern United States. It has been widely established in the field of special education that the issues facing urban and rural districts can vary greatly (Pennington, Horn, & Berrong, 2009). While



everyone struggles with common dilemmas, such as a critical shortage of high quality certified teachers, each type of district has unique characteristics. These characteristics include various forms and amounts of capital, views of the continuum of services related to LRE, levels of flexibility and capacity for change, and views on community and democratic principles (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Pennington et al., 2009). In larger school districts, policy interpretations are more likely to be found in written records as compared to the past practices or episodic nature of policy implementation in smaller school districts. For this study, it was important to focus on discourses about LRE at various levels that directly impact or influence the existence of ableism. A larger district is more likely to have records of its discourse than smaller districts. For that reason, the added dimension of discourse that occurs at a district level in urban districts represents another position through which discourse strands or themes may emerge.

A larger urban district was originally selected for this study, the initial contacts included a congenial initial introduction and visit with the central services for special education at the district office. Nevertheless, the district permission process extended over multiple months and finally ended with a negative response and an explanation that the research did not address the district's strategic plan. Another urban district, albeit with a smaller organization structure was approached for this study. This process was successful in allowing access for the study.

To begin the process of identifying principal participants, I first met with the district's Director of Special Education Services. The Director was extremely helpful in identifying potential schools that had a wide variety of special education services.

Among all of the recommendations he was able to cover a range of different types of services provided by the district to their students with disabilities. The Director approached each principal and personally requested their participation in the study. As a guideline, participation entailed one interview session ranging from 30 to 60 minutes and an opportunity to review the transcript for their individual interview.

Next, each principal arranged an interview at his or her convenience. In all cases, the interviews took place at the school within the first two months of the school year. Four participants hosted the interview in their offices with the door closed and one participant hosted the interview in a school conference room with the door closed. The sessions themselves ended up ranging from between 15 minutes to 45 minutes in length. Each principal appeared open and eager to assist. They frequently expressed a desire to be helpful and they were willing to share their thoughts, opinions, practices, and experiences. In order to ensure they were able to properly respond to the questions, two of the principals invited an additional member of their staff to participate in the interview. One principal requested the participation of the school's psychologist and the other requested the participation of the school's assistant principal.

At the beginning of each interview, the participants were each given a written summary of the study and they provided written consent for their participation (see Appendix D). They were provided an opportunity to select a pseudonym for themselves and their school or if they preferred not to, one would be assigned. Each of the participants declined selecting a pseudonym so I assigned a pseudonym for their schools and then identified participants by their roles/titles within that particular school. I

provided the participants an overview of how the sessions would be recorded and indicated that I would also be taking notes during the discussion. All interviews were recorded using a digital application that allowed for typed notes to be aligned with the specific recording time when the notes were taken.

Following the interviews, the recordings were submitted for professional verbatim transcription. Once the resulting transcripts were received, I reviewed each of the transcripts manually by listening to the recording and simultaneously editing the transcript for inaccuracies within the text. The edited transcripts were provided via email to each of the principal participants with the invitation to review and provide clarification or correction. Several principals commented on the verbatim transcription containing more interjections or non-lexical conversation sounds (i.e. um, uh) than they had expected. Because this study was not based on a linguistic analysis, the interjections created more of a distraction from the essence of their responses and those verbal interjections were removed. None of the participants indicated a need for correction or clarification of the transcripts.

### **Data Analysis: Coding Cycles and Theme Development**

CDA is long been criticized on the grounds that it is not an analysis, but rather it is an ideological interpretation by the researcher (Liasidou, 2008). Fairclough (1995) argued that CDA should be “as detailed, explicit and systematic as possible, that is, be guided by theoretical concepts, and not limited to more paraphrases or quotations” (p. 187). Rogers et al. (2005) identified three goals for the CDA researcher, 1) describe the relationships between and among certain texts, interactions, and social practices (mental

models), 2) interpret the configuration of discourse practices (social representations), and 3) describe, interpret, and offer an explanation of why and how social representations are constructed and changed.

The coding process for this study involved a discourse analysis of two distinctly different forms of data, preexisting documents and interview transcripts generated to answer the research questions. While coding in qualitative research is often described in discourse analysis as an exploratory process without specific formulas to follow, I did delineate specific steps to in order to ensure a rigorous interpretation of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Because interpretation is inherently subjective and influenced by the positionality of the researchers, Sipe and Ghiso (2004) warn again obscuring researcher involvement. They cite use of strategies such de-emphasizing positioning by using the passive voice, “as noted in such statements as ‘transcripts were coded and analyzed’” (p. 474). This could be viewed as an attempt to create rhetorical power and “present a situation or set of human activities as an objective, abstract, and powerful light, as if the forces of the natural universe were the cause rather than a fallible human being” (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004). To ensure the analysis of the data for this study is accurately portrayed, I will focus on the active voice and position myself intricately throughout the data analysis process. This section is designed to describe the analysis steps, including the pre-existing documents and the three different coding cycles used for the interview transcripts.

### **Document Coding**

When coding the documents, I reviewed only the brief excerpts that related most saliently to LRE. I began with the five case law interpretations. Because case law

interpretation is often used to guide legislation I thought it critical to review them for potential impact. Of the five, three occurred well before the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA. The other two occurred during 2004. Due to the nature of the case law interpretation providing specific information related directly to only one child, I circled and highlighted any terms that were directly related to environment and that were key to the final rulings of the Fourth Circuit Court. I identified a small portion of the full interpretation that represented the main idea of the ruling. I then bolded the term/s and aggregated the excerpts into Appendix B.

I followed the same process for the legislation, regulation, and guidance documents. These included the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, the 2006 Regulations issued to assist States with Parts B and C of the IDEA 2004, the 2012 State regulations for implementing IDEA 2004, and the 2012 State Process Guide for implementing federal and state regulations which cover the education of students with disabilities. Each one of these documents contained clearly delineated sections (identified with a Least Restrictive Environment heading) which served as the excerpts for analysis. The process of circling and highlighting terms led to the identification of key terms which were then bolded. These excerpts with the bolded term/s were aggregated into Appendix C.

As further explained in Chapter Four, district documents were not available. An analysis of such documents was not conducted in this study.

### **Interview Coding**

The formal coding process did not begin until after participants had reviewed and approved their transcripts. However, I did engage in pre-coding activities during the

manual transcript editing process. While looking for inaccuracies within the text I began making memos on the thoughts and emotions I was experiencing. I also highlighted words, phrases, or sections that either stood out due to unique word choices or because I had a particularly strong response to the text. During this pre-coding stage the identifiers had not yet been removed and I could still easily identify the person speaking and the compare how the written text portrayed the conversation versus how the speaker portrayed the conversation with their nonverbal cues.

A fundamental assumption in the study of semiotics is that all sign systems can be analyzed using seminological techniques and that those techniques can be applied to other forms of human communication (Sawyer, 2002). Fairclough (1995) understood the analysis of text as an extended sense to cover both the traditional levels of analysis within linguistics (i.e. phonology, grammar up to level sentence, vocabulary, and semantics) and the organizational level above the sentence (i.e. sentence coherence and organization). Because this analysis was designed to locate social representations within a particular dimension of disability studies, it was important look for discourse fragments that included properties that can vary as a function of social power. Thus, an emphasis in the deepest aspect of data analysis was placed on forms of interaction that are in principle susceptible to speaker control for all types of text analyzed. These controls include word order, lexical style, local semantic moves (such as disclaimers), organization, and rhetorical figures.

To start the formal coding process, I replaced all of the school names with pseudonyms and identified the speakers with either their role (Principal, School

Psychologist, and Assistant Principal). The critical perspective of the study required me to actively look for data that represented power relationships and potential oppression of students identified as disabled. I found it easier to critically engage in the coding process once the identifiers were removed. Coding cycle processes can range from a single word to full sentences to entire pages of text. The coding cycles can include the exact same units or even a reconfiguration of the codes developed thus far, capturing a datum's primary essence (Saldaña, 2009). The process for this study included three distinct cycles.

**Coding cycle 1.** During the first cycle of coding I utilized two different methods, In Vivo coding and Memos. In Vivo is a coding process that refers to the actual language used by the participants themselves. Saldaña (2009) noted that In Vivo coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies but is particularly useful for beginning researchers. It allowed me to learn how to code data while prioritizing and honoring the participant's voice. To do this I attuned myself to words and phrases that seemed to call for bolding, highlighting, or vocal emphasis if spoken aloud. I utilized Saldaña's (2009) guidance of,

Their salience may be attributed to such features as impacting nouns, action-oriented verbs, evocative word choices, clever or ironic phrases, similes and metaphors, etc. If the same words, phrases, or variations thereof are used often by the participant..., and seem to merit an In Vivo code, apply it. (p. 75)

While reading, I highlighted and circled sections of the text. As I reviewed each transcript the connections began to build and my coding became more judicious and focused.

I also took copious notes in the form of memos to ensure that my thoughts during the first cycle were documented. Clarke (2005) referred to memos as “sites of conversation with ourselves about our data” (p. 202). Memo writing should have a reciprocal relationship between the coding system and the evolution of understanding. It is a creative process relatively unencumbered by rigors and requirements of corroborating evidence (Dey, 1993; Saldaña, 2009). My memos included possible directions for themes, my unanswered questions, how I related to the participants, or any insightful connections I made with the data. Utilizing a critical perspective, my memos included an emphasis on how particular words or phrases may be examples of relationships of power.

**Coding cycle 2.** The data reviewed for my second cycle of coding included the same interview transcripts previously coded with the additional data of my written memos. As I coded the data for a second time, I reflected back and forth between the memos and already highlighted or circled sections of text. I also went back through the unmarked sections of text to see if I could make any additional connections. During this process, I focused my analysis using three different types of coding. First, I used Saldaña’s (2009) Value coding process. Briefly, a value is “the importance we attribute to oneself, another person, thing, or idea” (p. 90). While the constructs of values, attitudes, and beliefs each have their own meaning, the process of Value coding subsumes all three. In particular, I looked for phrases, such as “It is important,” “I



believe,” “I think,” “I feel,” and so forth. I then looked for corroborating evidence within the text that demonstrate a harmony (or lack of) between the participant’s stated values and their actions.

Second, I utilized Versus coding. Versus coding is particularly useful in critical discourse analysis and it looks through the data for evidence of power issues by identifying binary relationships. Versus codes identify in binary terms the “individuals, groups, social systems, organizations, phenomena, processes, concepts, etc. in direct conflict with each other” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 94).

Finally, I used Magnitude coding to help identify the frequency with which certain words, phrases, or meanings were repeated through the transcripts. While Magnitude coding is generally considered a method to quantify a phenomenon, Saldaña (2009) warned that frequency in the data does not necessarily imply significance, but it is worth exploring any emergent patterns. When doing this type of coding, I looked not only for high or intense frequency but also for infrequent or absent data. At the end of the second cycle of coding, I had a preliminary list of discourse strands had emerged from the analysis and a list of particularly salient words and excerpts that represented each potential strand.

**Coding cycle 3.** During the third cycle of coding I merged my two different data sources to identify discourse fragments common among them. I combined the fragments to identify distinct discourse strands. This process included utilizing additional frequency coding to determine the extent to which discourse strands found within the document data were represented or not represented within the interview transcripts. Using this top down

method allowed me to consider the impact of the documents on principals' understanding and reported practice. I also consolidated my potential stands from the interview transcripts into a smaller number of clearer and more salient themes. I validated my themes by creating a chart (see Appendix E) to compare the presence or absence of each theme within the individual interview transcripts. For this study, I only considered themes that occurred in a majority of the transcripts.

### **Triangulation**

Although the term *triangulation* frequently refers to the use of multiple research methods, it also can refer to the incorporation of multiple data sources and multiple theoretical perspectives (Glesne, 2011). In positivist research, triangulation is used to establish valid claims of truths. From a critical perspective, it is used to help illuminate differences in interpretations and inconsistencies in the data. Rather than attempt to validate that an ultimate truth in any power relationship or hegemonic ideology can be clearly identified, this research study used triangulation to reveal the complexities of discourse in any given situation. In this study, there are several axis points where triangulation occurred. First, the method of this study was based on two levels of discourse theory, the socio-cognitive theory of how discourse interacts with our cognitive mental models and social representations (van Dijk, 2001) and a structures theory of how discourses exists in spatial locations (Jager, 2001). The data analysis incorporated critical elements of each policy level to ensure a comprehensive view of how mental models were made and social representations were constructed from individual discourse texts.

Second, three different data media were included to capture how power relationships between discourse planes and positions interact to create local meaning.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a theoretical basis for the selection of methods and to delineate the precise steps used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The methods were selected to align with my theoretical perspective as a researcher and their relevance to this study's research questions. The goal in answering these research questions is to create knowledge.

Where there is knowledge, there is power.... Power as such is not visible. Can it be made visible – perhaps in an indirect way or in the form of effects? All knowledge is, of course, linked to power. In all knowledge which prevails, power prevails. It is generated to power and exercises power. Thus, there is knowledge in power. (Jager, 2001, p. 60)

As previously mentioned, discourses have a history, a present, and a future (Jager, 2001). Knowledge has the power to change the future of discourse. If discourse changes, the object of the discourse loses its previous identity and establishes new meaning (Danforth, 2006).

Chapter Four presents information on the research sites selected and the types of special education programming options available within the sites. Chapter Four also includes the results of my analysis and directly answer the research questions for this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

This study investigated whether the LRE clause of IDEA creates or reinforces institutional ableism through the following research questions:

- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within case law interpretations and federal regulations related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices in the LRE section of the state's IDEA regulations and guidelines related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within a selected urban district's policies and guidelines related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices found in face-to-face interviews with five traditional elementary school principals?

The purpose of this study was achieved through a critical discourse analysis of targeted case law interpretations, federal legislation and regulations, state regulations and guidelines, and the transcripts of interviews with five elementary school principals. This chapter presents the results of the analysis for the research questions. It is organized into three sections beginning with the research context of sites and participants. The second section provides the results of the located discourse strands and the final section provides a conclusion summarizing the answers to the study's questions.

### **Research Context: Sites and Participants**

Information on the basic demographics, enrollment, and performance on state-wide required assessments were available online. None of the schools had a new principal (two years or less) and they all fell into an enrollment range between 511 and 733 students. From the perspective of an outsider, each school had unique physical characteristics and personality. The climates within the front offices ranged from warm and conversational to quiet and stoic. All of the names of the schools and personnel have been changed to pseudonyms.

#### **Savannah Elementary**

Savannah Elementary had a total enrollment of 712 students and received a state rating Excellent, which represented the best rating available in the state's assessment of accountability system. The school was non-Title I and provided students identified as students with disabilities with resource settings and two different models of self-contained classrooms. One of their self-contained settings was identified as designed for students who fell within a moderate intellectual disability range, "their IQs are probably somewhere in the 30s to 45 or 50. Usually in the 40s" (Principal, Savannah Elementary). The other self-contained setting was identified as designed for students with specific learning disabilities,

It's classes for – it used to be classified as the learning disability...but now that we kind of change those classifications and everything is kind of melting together ...it's more the high function – higher functioning. You're looking at your, um, upper 80s to 90 range. (Principal, Savannah Elementary)

The principal had been with the school for three years and 64.6% of the 48 teachers had advanced degrees. Savannah Elementary had a 21.2:1 student-teacher ratio in core subjects and experienced 90.8% teacher return rate from the previous school year. The principal served as the sole interviewee for the school.

### **Appalachian Elementary**

Appalachian Elementary had a total enrollment of 511 students and received a state rating Excellent. The school was non-Title I and serving students identified as students with disabilities in resource and general education settings only. The range of specialized instruction was described by the Principal as

Okay, we have speech; we have a full-time speech pathologist. We have one full time resource teacher, and a part-time resource teacher. One of those resource teachers works with the younger students in Grades K through Two. The part-time teacher works with the older students in Grades Three and Five. Currently, we don't – well, actually monitoring – a student being monitored would be the least restrictive environment as far as special education services. We do have many students who are just being monitored by the special education teacher, and some that are monitored by the speech teacher or pathologist. (Principal, Appalachian Elementary)

The principal had been with the school for eight years and 81.8% of the 33 teachers had advanced degrees. Appalachian Elementary had a 20.8:1 student-teacher ratio in core subjects and experienced 94.5% teacher return rate from the previous school year. Both the school's Principal and Assistant Principal participated in the interview.

### **Prairie Elementary**

Prairie Elementary had a total enrollment of 682 students and received a state rating Excellent. The school was non-Title I and serving students identified as students with disabilities in resource and general education settings only. “We have LD resource pullout here....Our one resource teacher goes and does inclusion in fifth grade” (Principal, Prairie Elementary).

The principal had been with the school for ten years and 79.1% of the 43 teachers had advanced degrees. Prairie Elementary had a 21.0:1 student-teacher ratio in core subjects and experienced 87.4% teacher return rate from the previous school year. The principal served as the sole interviewee for the school.

### **Sea Cliffs Elementary**

Sea Cliffs Elementary had a total enrollment of 733 students and received a state rating Excellent. The school was non-Title I and serving students identified as students with disabilities in resource and self-contained classrooms. The principal described the self-contained classrooms as

I have three – they’re really cross-categorical now, but we started with them being ED. So but we have, you know, we have some autism in there. We have some children on the spectrum who just have a hard time and can’t – can’t make it in that regular classroom. So but it’s in my upper grades, with my fourth and fifth graders, Emotionally – [Disabled]. (Principal, Sea Cliffs Elementary)

The principal had been with the school for eight years and 72.9% of the 48 teachers had advanced degrees. Sea Cliffs Elementary had a 21.2:1 student-teacher ratio

in core subjects and experienced 95.0% teacher return rate from the previous school year. The principal served as the sole interviewee for the school.

### **Alpine Elementary**

Alpine Elementary had a total enrollment of 516 students and received a state rating of Good, which represented the second best rating available within the state accountability system. The school was non-Title I and serving students identified as students with disabilities in resource and two self-contained classrooms. One of their self-contained settings was identified as designed for students who fell within a mild intellectual disability range. The other self-contained setting was identified as "...one class that's not classified. I don't know if they've classified that child – this class on paper as a primarily autistic class, but that's who we have in that class, autistic children" (School Psychologist, Alpine Elementary).

The principal had been with the school for eight years and 67.6% of the 34 teachers had advanced degrees. Alpine Elementary had a 20.1:1 student-teacher ratio in core subjects and experienced 90.5% teacher return rate from the previous school year. Both the school's Principal and School Psychologist participated in the interview.

### **Results: Discourse Strands**

It is important to note that most of the strands developed during my analysis of the interview data did not have clear connections to the discourse strands found within the document data. The results within this chapter include the identification of strands vertically through discourse positions as a method of answering the research questions. Another analysis was conducted horizontally through the principal interviews in order to



consider principal voices. A summary of the principal voice strands is presented in Chapter Five. In this section, I explain the vertical strands identified through the discourse positions.

### **Vertical Discourse Strands**

The two different types of data collected represent three different discourse positions within an educational discourse plane: federal, state, and principal positions. Although I attempted to utilize four different discourse positions, the Director of Special Education in the participating district informed me that while they have many forms related to ensuring compliance with IEPs, he was not aware of anything that related specifically to LRE. During the interviews, two different principals mentioned a district level PowerPoint presentation that was disseminated annually covering many different legal requirements for faculty but prefaced that it did not go into specifics.

And it includes lots of things. FERPA, HIPAA, IDEA, IDEIA, all of those things.  
(Principal, Sea Cliffs Elementary)

There's a district Power Point that we go over. It doesn't get into, like real specifics, but we go over it with every – every principal has to go over it with every employee every year at the beginning of the year, and it talks about the IDEA, you know, what falls – the main things that fall under that law about sharing information and it's probably also in our district, district personnel handbook. (Principal, Appalachian Elementary)

As a follow-up to these comments I made another appointment to speak with the Director of Special Education Services. I described the PowerPoint mentioned in the

interviews and the Director indicated that he was not aware of it and was unsure what the Principals were referring. For the purposes of this study I concluded that the district level discourse position did not include documents that could be gathered for analysis.

An analysis of the documents gathered led me to identify 13 different discourse fragments that, from a critical perspective, inform and feed our mental models and thereby our social representations of students with disabilities. I then tied those fragments together to identify six different discourse strands. The discourse fragments and strands are represented graphically in Appendices B and C. The six strands include the maximum extent appropriate, regular education/class/environment, general education/class/environment, disabled child or student, child or student with a disability, and mainstream. Table 4.1 provides the frequency of fragments within each strand and within each data source.

Table 4.1

*Vertical discourse strands and fragment frequency.*

Discourse Strand	Fragment Frequency							
	Case Law	Federal Legislation and Regs.	State Regulation and Guidance	Alpine Elementary	Appalachain Elementary	Prairie Elementary	Savannah Elementary	Sea Cliffs Elementary
Maximum Extent App.	4	2	4	0	0	0	0	0
Regular Env./Class/Ed.	6	4	2	24	7	8	4	4
General Env./Class/Ed.	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0
Disabled Child/Student	18	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Child/Student with Dis.	0	6	18	0	0	0	1	0
Mainstream	12	0	0	1	0	0	5	0

**Maximum extent appropriate.** IDEA (2004) carried forward in reauthorization the language that “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities... are educated with children who are not disabled.” This particular discourse fragment is found throughout the case law interpretations and each of the federal and state documents reviewed. Within the discourse plane of special education (a subset of the educational discourse plane) this fragment represents a primary right afforded students under IDEA. Because the fragment itself is key to understanding LRE within IDEA and it is repeated verbatim through the legislative and regulatory documents, I considered the maximum extent appropriate and any synonymous terms (e.g., greatest extent) as a discourse strand. It was interesting that although the strand was a key element in the document data, the language and essence of the strand was completely absent from any of the interview data. Rather than attempt to address the disparity within the vertical strand discussion, I have dedicated a section of the results in Chapter Five to presenting the operational definition of LRE provided by each of the five participating principals.

**Regular vs. General.** The use of the word *regular* to describe educational classrooms, programs, environments, students, and teachers was prolific throughout all of the discourse positions and every data source. When used to as a term to further define or identify a person, place or thing, regular creates a dichotomous relationship with those not included. Indicating that a classroom is regular implies that other classrooms are *irregular*, or somehow flawed. Likewise, referring to some students as regular implies that the others are not. The LRE environment clause of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) states,

removal of children with disabilities from the *regular educational environment* occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in *regular classes* with the use of supplementary aides and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (p. 34)

This same language is repeated verbatim in the federal and state regulations. I located discourse fragments containing this use of the word regular frequently throughout each of the interview transcripts. It was clearly the common language used to identify where something or someone fell in this dichotomy.

A word often used interchangeably with regular is *general* (e.g. general education, general curriculum, general education student, etc.). The word general implies covering a broad range and designed for everyone, serving as a foundation within which specialties or subsets can be constructed (i.e. education generalist and educational specialist). While the federal and state regulations have not moved away from the use of regular, the state guidance document used general exclusively – clearly using it to replace regular in every instance. While I found it admirable that the state moved towards language designed to create inclusive mental models, it has not overcome the weight of the regulatory language and made its way down to the principal discourse position. None of the five principal participants deviated from the use of the term regular.

**Child with disability vs. disabled child.** There has been an ongoing evolution of how to refer to any person who has an identifiable disability. While the term disability is considered an improvement upon handicap, the prefix *dis-* has a lexical meaning of opposite, away, or the reverse of. This creates a negative connotation that a person

without a given ability is away or separate from those who do possess the ability. While this debate ensues, there is another issue of whether there is a difference between the discourse fragments *child with a disability* or *disabled child* and *child without a disability* or *non-disabled child*. Different variations of these fragments were found throughout all of the document data. I combined each of these to identify two strands, one which places emphasis on the person (child with disability) and one which places emphasis on the disability before the person (disabled child).

All of the federal and state legislation, regulations, and guidance were written to place an emphasis on the person over the disability. Even though several of the case law interpretations were recent enough to have person first emphasis legislation to reference, all of the discourse fragments found within the five cases analyzed used language which emphasized the disability over the person. More interestingly, I found only four total fragments (from three different transcripts) that referenced either of these fragment structures, or any other synonymous fragments. What I did find was some additional fragments which I interpreted to be efforts to demonstrate inclusive values and beliefs. However, embedded with the value fragments were fragments that depicted social representations of the child as being the disability itself (considering verbs *is/are* as distinctly different fragments than the verb *with*). Examples of both these are provided in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2:

*Value and mental model fragments.*

Principal	Value Fragments	Mental Model Fragments
Alpine Elementary	I mean we're all different.	She's got that and ones that we know are ID [Intellectually Disabled].
Prairie Elementary	You know, we don't talk about numbers and sub groups here, and we don't talk percentage. We talk children and children's names is what we use here..."	So rather than just trying to treat that child and disability, I want to get the parents to understand, you know, it's all right, if, you know, Johnny is autistic.
Appalachian Elementary	You know, it just depends on I guess looking at every single child as an individual and figuring out how we're going to best help that student.	Well, and I can think of a situation even on the other end of the spectrum concerning a child who say is autistic and the mom wants the child to possibly skip a grade, that kind of thing.
Sea Cliffs Elementary	NA	So but we have, you know, we have some autism in there [referring to students].
Savannah Elementary	NA	If you've got a kid that is maybe LD or OHI or whatever and just needed a little bit of help with focusing or, you know, something like that, especially with the ADD kids, maybe they're, they've got a 504 or maybe they're OHI and they've got an IEP for some extra help..."

**Mainstream.** The final vertical strand was identified both because of its strong presence and complete absence across the discourse positions. I found the term *mainstream* 12 different times within the five case law interpretations. Mainstreaming refers to act of removing a student from a separate special education placement and putting them back into a general education environment. The term implies that a student starts outside of the general education environment and has to be deliberately put back in. There are no references to mainstreaming or any of its variations in any of the federal or state legislation, regulations, or guidance. While it was only mentioned by two of the five principals, this particular fragment was located five times within the transcript for Savannah Elementary. For this particular principal, I interpreted the use of the word mainstream to be similar to how other principals referred to the regular education classroom. “Whatever they need so that we’re going slowly, trying to get that level that, you know, gives them the amount of accommodations and modifications that they need without necessarily removing them from the mainstream” (Principal, Savannah Elementary).

### **Conclusion**

This study was designed to answer four research questions. Each posed the same essential question through four different research discourse positions. Below is an answer to each question and a summary of the overall findings.

#### **Question One**

Question one asked what discourse themes could be interpreted from the textual choices within case law interpretations and federal regulations related to LRE? The



analysis demonstrated both similarities and differences between case law interpretation and the federal regulations. Both document types were heavy in the use of the term *regular* to describe instructional environments designed for students without disabilities. Additionally, both utilized the language of the *maximum extent appropriate* as criteria to determine a student with disabilities participation in that environment.

One difference between the two showed a clear disconnect in sensitivity towards person first language. The case law interpretations consistently placed emphasis on the disability over the child. In contrast, the federal regulations consistently placed emphasis on the child over the disability. The case law interpretations also demonstrated frequent use of the term *mainstreaming*, language not found in the federal regulations. Use of the term mainstreaming may have contributing effects on the marginalizing students with disabilities as it positions them outside of the general education environment.

Despite their differences, the themes that emerged between these two discourse positions clearly support and maintain ableism. Students with disabilities are identified outside of the realm of regular. Efforts to be inclusive are focused on a mainstream, or push-back-in model. This finding supports the previous research within the literature review that the language of policy, specifically IDEA, utilizes an assimilationist approach by establishing an instant hierarchy between those being assimilated and those for whom the system was originally intended (Beratan, 2006; Liasidou, 2008).

## **Question Two**

Question two asked what discourse themes could be interpreted from the textual choices in the LRE section of the state's IDEA regulations and guidelines related to

LRE? Interesting, there was virtually no difference between the federal and state regulations related to LRE. It was clear that when handling regulations, the state deferred to the federal language. Both documents continued with the use of the fragment *to the maximum extent appropriate* and both utilized person-first language.

There were, however, significant differences between the state regulations and the state guidelines for school districts. Completely absent from the guidelines were any reference to educational environments as *regular*. Instead, the guidelines relied on the term *general* to distinguish one environment from another. Because the term *general* is not as dichotomous as *regular*, it could be viewed as an effort to reduce the stigma of disability. The guidelines also introduce use of the fragment *peers without disabilities*. Referring to students with and without disabilities as peers could be interpreted as an effort to reduce an implicit hierarchy between the two. However, the fragment was only found once within the process guide, minimizing the effect.

Overall, this finding supports Liasidou's (2008) premise that policies do not exist in a vacuum, "they reflect underlying ideologies and assumptions in a society" (p. 485). It was clear that within the state discourse documents, there were attempts to acknowledge findings of the new disability history movement described in the literature review. The inconsistencies of these efforts and the use of non-regulatory documents (rather than to challenge regulation) provide evidence of the power struggles inherent in special education policy. "Special education policymaking, as part of social life, is fraught with hegemonic struggles that saturate its philosophical tenets and practices" (Liasidou, 2008, p. 487). As a result, the analysis of the documents from the particular

state of this study found ongoing support and maintenance, albeit at a reduced level, of ableism.

### **Question Three**

Question three asked what discourse themes could be interpreted from the textual choices within a selected urban district's policies and guidelines related to LRE? As reported earlier in this chapter, the participating district did not have, or make available, any documents for analysis. Therefore, this study was limited to answering only three out of the four research questions.

### **Question Four**

Question four asked what discourse themes could be interpreted from the textual choices found in face-to-face interviews with five traditional elementary school principals? When looking at the data through the lens of only the principal transcripts, I found significant evidence supporting and maintaining ableism. The two themes described in the finding that were most significant in the principal discourse position were their use of the term *regular* and their identification of students as being synonymous with their disability.

The principals within this study referred to educational environments exclusively as either regular education or special education. These were described as clearly separate locations. There were very little, if any, references to person-first language. Instead, the disability label associated with an individual student was an inherent part of their primary identity within the school community. This result supports findings from the literature review that students with disabilities continue to be viewed from a theoretical perspective

of positivism. In this study, students were viewed through a medical understanding of disability and discourse reduced them to their individual diagnostic categories (Rogers, 2003; Stamou & Padeliaadu, 2009).

### **Summary**

Together, the questions were designed to investigate whether the LRE clause of IDEA creates or reinforces institutional ableism. Using a method of critical discourse analysis, themes emerged from the discourse positions. While I could not clearly establish that IDEA creates institutional ableism, the themes clearly indicate that it not only reinforces it, but also actively maintains its presence within the educational discourse plane.

The findings support Fairclough's (1995) position that discourse can become so naturalized that participants are largely unaware of any oppressive elements. At no time did the principals indicate feeling that students with disabilities were oppressed or influenced by power relationships. The principal participants were unable to make any clear connections with the analyzed documents other than the requirement to ensure all students are educated and included in *regular* settings to the best of the school's current ability. What that meant for students was different across each school and was largely influenced by perceived resources and individual student's ability to respond to instruction. Given the wealth of data gathered in the interview process, I felt it was appropriate to include in this study a horizontal critical discourse analysis across principal voices. That analysis is included in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PRINCIPAL VOICES

#### **Introduction**

The complexities that occur within an individual school go far beyond what one-dimensional documents can meaningfully influence on a day-to-day basis and that complexity affected analysis of the discourse planes in this study. In order to gain a better understanding of the mental models and social representations interview participants held about students with disabilities, I needed to work horizontally across the transcripts. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the discourse strands and resulting themes identified through the participants discourse position and, using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of the child as a foundation, identify an emerging theory that explains how the participating principals operationalize LRE in their schools. For this chapter, it is important to note that two principal participants invited additional members of their staff to be part of the interview.

#### **Themes**

The same three cycle coding process used to answer the research questions were reapplied to the vertical analysis. During cycle one, I utilized Saldaña's (2009) In Vivo coding and took memos of all my thoughts and interactions with the transcripts. During cycle two, I reviewed the transcripts again, reflecting back and forth between my previous codes and my memos. During this analysis, I utilized Saldaña's (2009) coding techniques to identify values, binary relationships, and frequency of textual fragments. I identified 20 potential strands during this cycle two of coding. During cycle three, I

combed back through all of my previous codes, memos, and discourse strands to identify six final themes. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the strands and themes within cycles two and three.

Table 5.1:

*Horizontal discourse themes through the principal position.*

Second Cycle Coding Strands	Third Cycle Themes
Differentiated Instruction	Absent
Universal Design	
Positionality (outside v. inside) and distance	Dichotomy
Concept of duality	
Beliefs in how students view of special education	
We are all different	Frustration and Help
Frustration	
Better Fit	
Teacher/Student Match	
Act of mercy or help	
Deficit Models of Ability or Performance	Labels and Deficits
Labels as defining characteristics	
Retention	Positions of Power
Positions of Power	
LRE as a legal mandate	
Role of Assistance Team as mechanism for intervention	
District-wide patterns (Double-dose, Removal from Science and SS, Mandated PPT)	
Student responsibility	Responsibility for Student Success
School responsibility	

### **Labels and Deficits.**

While I found it encouraging that principals did not reference students frequently as either disabled or non-disabled, closer inspection of how they described students led to

a theme that students are identified by their particular area of disability under IDEA or a characteristic stereo-typically associated with the disability. Disabled alone was replaced by specific labels such as learning disabled, emotionally disabled, intellectually disabled, and their associated acronyms. In order to understand the discourse of the participating principals, Table 5.2 provides a list of acronyms used as identifiers and the corresponding area of disability. Some disabilities are not identified under a distinct acronym and are cited in the transcripts by their full name, such as autism.

Table 5.2:

*Disability acronyms.*

Acronym	Disability Description
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ED	Emotionally Disabled
ID	Intellectually Disabled
LD	Learning Disabled
OHI	Other Health Impaired.

When discussing particular students within the interview, the School Psychologist at Alpine Elementary described them as “students we know are ID.” Similarly, the Principal at Savannah Elementary described students who may be successful in the general education setting as

If you’ve got a kid that is maybe LD or OHI or whatever and just needed a little bit of help with focusing or, you know, something like that, especially with the ADD kids, maybe they’re, they’ve got a 504 or maybe they’re OHI.

When describing a student whom the Principal at Appalachian Elementary felt was unsuccessful in the general education environment, the principal used these words “He is just low, low, low, low.”

I interpreted these types of discourse fragments as leading to mental models that locate a problem or deficit within the student. When describing conversations with parents of students initially being identified under IDEA, the Principal at Prairie Elementary said, “It is a hard pill for a parent to swallow to say your kid is not quote/unquote ‘normal’, and that they need extra help, and they’re going to go in a special place because everybody has those things.” These types of mental models keep students with disabilities viewed under a positivistic lens. The students are then provided specialized instruction under IDEA with the understanding that “Special education doesn’t fix everything” (Assistant Principal, Appalachian Elementary).

### **Frustration and Help.**

When looking for fragments that may represent the participant’s values, I found ample discourse which I interpreted to represent strong levels of care. They care. They want to do what they believe is best for their students. The second theme that emerged was that of student frustration and the intense need for help. I identified this as the key criteria used by all five principals in both the identification of students under IDEA and the criteria by which they determined LRE. Table 5.3 contains the clearest discourse examples supporting my interpretation of this theme.



Table 5.3:

*Frustration and help*

Source	Discourse Example
Assistant Principal, Appalachian Elementary	Lack of progress and losing hope. I think there comes a point where you see a child, like they're sort of ignorant to the fact that they aren't doing very well. They're just kind of happy go lucky, and then you see them hit the wall, and.... I can't do anything they're doing. I'm behind. I don't want to come to school. I hate school all of a sudden.
Principal, Savannah Elementary	<p>More of the crying, social withdrawal. She would say things like, "I don't fit in here, I'm not smart enough to be in this class," and it would break your heart.</p> <p>You also don't want their disability to cause them to be so frustrated that they aren't able to handle, they shouldn't be that stressed at six years old.</p>
School Psychologist, Alpine Elementary	And a lot of times, it's more than just academics that requires that child to move because we – a lot of times, I'm going to say 90% of the time, the children are becoming very frustrated , losing self confidence and self esteem.
Principal, Sea Cliffs Elementary	And, you know, emotionally, are they going to be able to handle the kind of demands that are in there?
Principal, Prairie Elementary	As long as we were making growth, as far as I'm concerned, if we're making growth, he doesn't need to go self-contained because if I can still get him forward, in my opinion, he's better here with me than he is going to be with somewhere else. And that might be arrogant or not, but as far as I'm concerned, our school is going to get him further than somebody else will as long as we're making gains. So once we get to the point where we're seeing consistently that we're not getting gains, he's frustrated out, she's frustrated out, that's when we need to start looking at some things.

## **Dichotomy of Regular and Special**

The dichotomy of *regular* was one of the vertical discourse strands I identified in my analysis. I found the same to be true in my horizontal analysis of the transcript data. There are regular students, and then there are students with disabilities. Students with disabilities, “they see themselves wanting to be able to have what all the other children have. So yeah, definitely working more towards that regular ed classroom” (Principal, Sea Cliffs Elementary). When discussing the importance of the LRE, the Principal at Alpine Elementary stated, “Well, the thing obviously is to provide them as much as we can with what every other child gets here.” In a similar vein, the Principal of Savannah Elementary stated, “They learned so much from their peer interactions and to be with regular kids.”

I also identified another significant dichotomy within the interview transcripts – that of location – inside or outside of a general education classroom. They are either in, or they are out. This begins immediately upon identification under IDEA. “I guess once they’re placed in special ed, then you’re looking at, you know, we start with 30 minutes of resource, 50 minutes of resource, you know, maybe upping that to two periods or three periods” (Principal, Savannah Elementary). There was no evidence, throughout any of the transcripts, of attempting to meet the initial needs of students under IDEA completely in the general education environment with accommodations or modifications. They may receive accommodations or modifications while in the general education classroom but that would be in addition to the time of removal, “Now children who need pullout services or who have to – who belong to self-contained class, then certainly

accommodations have to be made for them” (Principal, Alpine Elementary). When principals did discuss different types of inclusive in-class supports, it was only in relation to students who had demonstrated success and as a result, had earned their way back in.

So basically, we have that near grade level grouping. We have the middle grouping, and then we just have that Hail Mary group down there. And we could definitely see there were three distinct groups, and that one that was near grade level, we said, “All right, that’s going to be our inclusion class because we want to keep in class, and we’ll put you in there with support. So we have a good cluster of kids in just kind-of one teacher’s classroom right now down there, and that’s the one she goes and does inclusion in. But the other grouping, that mid-grouping, they weren’t high enough to be there, but they weren’t low enough to be in Hail Mary, so they’re still doing pull out, and that teacher is hoping that by the end of the year, between him and our resource teacher that they’ll be able to move towards an inclusive model by the end of the year. (Principal, Prairie Elementary)

References made to keeping them in the general education environment such as “Our ultimate goal is to keep them in regular ed as long as we can” (Principal, Prairie Elementary) were related to activities done prior to initial placement in special education.

Interestingly, the participants had very little acknowledgment of negative societal values associated with being inside or outside of general education environments. One principal stated, “To me, pullouts here are not a big deal. Our kids don’t look at them as a stigma. You know, what we get here when kids get pulled out is, ‘is it my turn to go?’”

(Principal, Prairie Elementary). Another stated, “I mean, I have every year kids asking me, ‘Can I be in Ms. Robin’s next year?’ They have no idea that it’s a self-contained class” (Principal, Savannah Elementary). And when referencing discussions with parents during IEP meetings, the Principal at Sea Cliffs Elementary stated “You know, all the things that they’re able to do, the clubs, everything that they’re able to participate in. And once they understand that we’re not sticking them in a closet somewhere...”

### **Positions of Power.**

I found positions of power throughout all of the transcripts. During my analysis, I struggled to know where to focus my attention. Should it be on the fragments related to power relationships between principals and parents, like when the Savannah Elementary principal described a disagreement with parents by stating “They were allowed to leave them in regular ed”? Or power between the district level administration and principals, like when the Alpine Elementary principal described a district mandate that all resource pull-out occur during science and social studies by stating, “You know, we all turned in our schedules just to make sure that we were not pulling children from reading [or] math”? Or between faculty and students, like when the same principal reported that student self-advocacy was not really relevant before third grade because in “kindergarten through third, they just do what we ask them to do” (Principal, Alpine Elementary)? Or the delegation of power from principals to individuals they believed had expertise in special education, demonstrated when two of the participating principals pulled additional support staff into their interview session to ensure the questions could be answered.

Ultimately, the overarching discourse strand was that principals trust their teachers and whatever the special education teacher thinks the LRE for the students should be is what the principal whole-heartedly believes should happen. “I have a lot of trust in – in my resource teachers. And I’ve got one that’s brand new this year, but I’m hoping she’ll get there, but the other one has been there a couple years now, trust her tremendously. My faculty trusts her.” (Principal, Prairie Elementary). There may be other staff members that contribute to LRE recommendations such as the school psychologist, but most expressed sentiments similar to the Principal at Appalachian Elementary, “Our teachers are usually, pretty much dead-on here.”

### **Responsibility for Student Achievement**

The discourse fragments relating to responsibility for student achievement might divide into two distinct strands. One strand clearly indicated that students were responsible for their own achievement and access back to the general education environment had to be earned,

We don’t allow them to go in there until they’re ready and work with them to make sure they have the resources in place, and to have a skill set in place for themselves and to advocate for themselves to be able to go in and do that.

(Principal, Sea Cliffs Elementary)

And one strand indicated that school communities and teachers were responsible, “I want us to look at every kid as an individual. What can we do to get that individual as far – far as possible?” (Principal, Prairie Elementary). When looking at them through a value coding lens, I concluded that the participants generally possessed a value system which

acknowledged teacher responsibility. However, the actions, activities, and scenarios indicated that those values did not necessarily translate into practice. Examples include:

He needed to be with us where you can just give him an open shot and say, ‘Let’s see what you can do here with us.’ And I think when I think of least restrictive, to me, that’s – that’s the idea is we want to open the world back up again, and you do that through opportunity” (Principal, Prairie Elementary).

So we did move her to the self-contained classroom, and since that time, she’s – it’s a multi-age level classroom where it’s like kindergarten through second grade or the lower performing second graders....But she’s still in that low end.... We’re starting to see some great gains, so I think it’s kind of coming together, and we’re going to start looking at mainstreaming her out for maybe science or social studies, to see if she can’t start handling some of those things. So you know, when you see a child that reaches that level and really needs a different environment, then you’re going to do that because you’re going to – you want to push them. (Principal, Savannah Elementary).

It’s unfair to continue to do more of what you’ve been doing, and you haven’t made any progress. That would be the time to put that child in a situation where he would be successful (Assistant Principal, Appalachian Elementary)

### **Absent Themes.**

During magnitude coding, the focus shifted to fragments that occurred with an elevated frequency. While high frequency can be very helpful in understanding a phenomenon, so can low frequency (Saldaña, 2009). Outside of two principals indicating

that the district's special education office had popular trainings, one which focused on differentiation of instruction, the term differentiate as it related to the schools' respective instructional practices only occurred one time in all five transcripts. Similarly, there were no fragments that touched on universal designs for learning or any other strategy anticipatory of needs of all students during instructional planning. The transcripts included many fragments related to accommodations, which may be evidence of the longitudinal influence of IDEA in our practitioners' language. Whether the ability to make accommodations for students with disabilities had any impact on the child's LRE was unclear.

### **Working Definitions of LRE**

A section of the interview protocol focused on eliciting the principal's working definitions of LRE. The fragments, summarized in this section, expressed how they attempted to answer the broad question, "Tell me what you know about the least restrictive environment." It was appropriate to include this in an additional chapter, as Saldaña's (2009) coding cycles did not work with these fragments. Principals were cognitively aware of the LRE clause of IDEA, but not in a way that led them into specific professional decision rules. LRE, an airy acronym, floated without any clear shape or form into their professional arena. In a study designed to understand the impact of the LRE clause of IDEA on institutional ableism, this was really the heart of the matter. In lieu of a coding analysis, I have embedded the discourse fragments into a graphic representation (see Figure 5.1) of the interaction between IDEA, these specific principals'

working definition of LRE, and how they connect to the review of the literature and the study findings.

### **Positions of Power, Re-examined**

Reading each of the working definitions of LRE summarized in Figure 5.1 leads to an understanding that these particular principals did not have any guideline or plan for how they were going to ensure students with disabilities were educated in the LRE. This was not surprising; given one of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the participant interview transcripts was how much these principals deferred to their teachers. They were highly reliant on the recommendations of individual teachers, relinquishing their positional power to the field of special education.

Principals also recognized the power of parents in making educational decisions. Several principals discussed the relationship with parents as a negotiation and compromise away from what their teachers were recommending and away from what the principals clearly supported as the best outcome for the student. In addition to teachers and parents, these principals also deferred to other support staff who they believed had instructional expertise in special education. The support staff included school psychologists, assistant principals, and the district's central office special education staff. These individuals were so strongly trusted with decisions that two of the principals included an additional participant from this group in their interview to ensure that the questions could be thoroughly answered. In sum, these principals did not have to have a clear definition for making decisions about LRE because they were not the ones making the decisions.



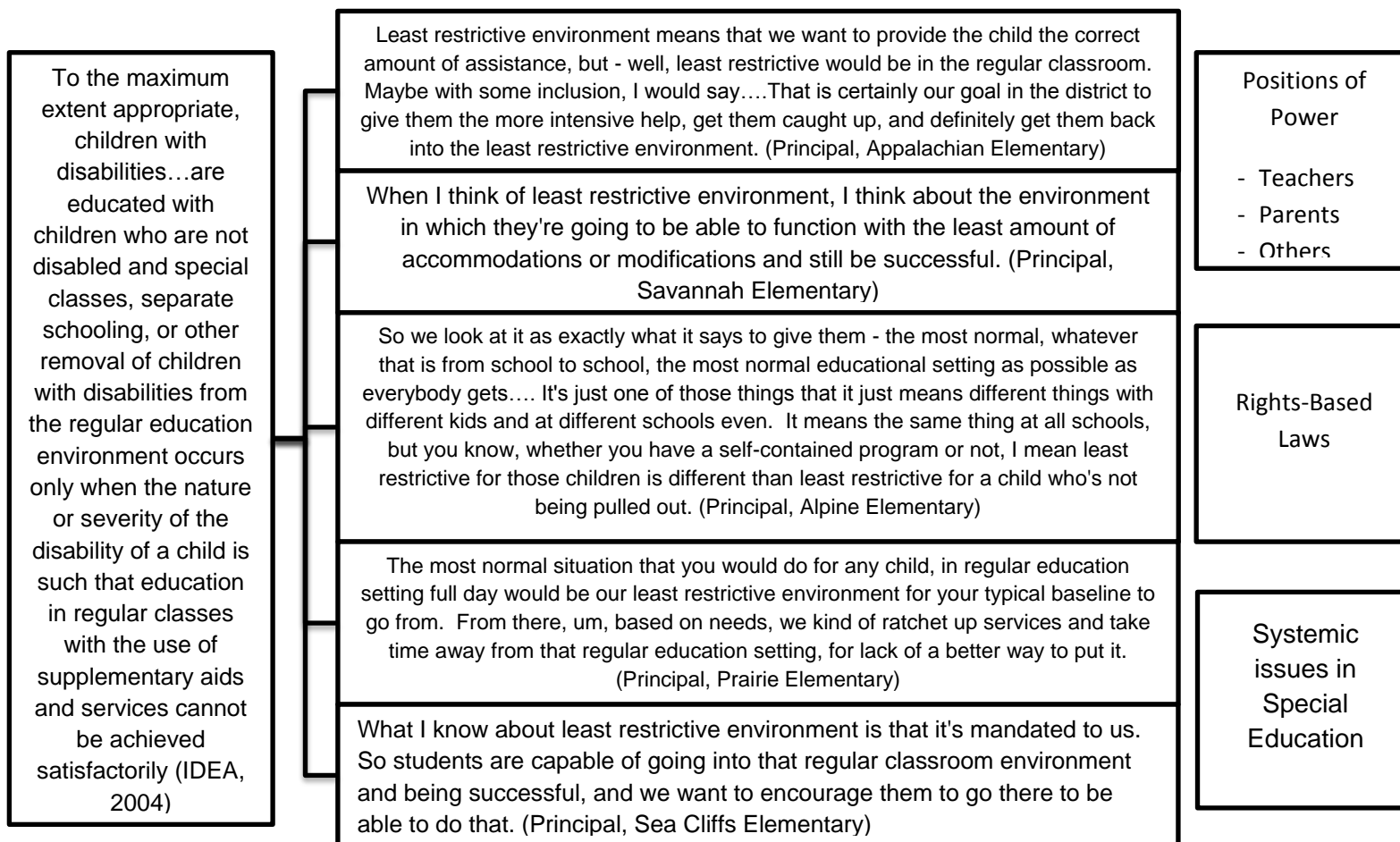


Figure 5.1. LRE in action

## **Rights-Based Law**

IDEA is a rights-based law. Within that type of system, equal rights are served through protecting the rights of individual students. As a result, LRE decisions for students are made on an individual basis. While that may be admirable, it also places decisions in the hands of individuals with power who operate under varying mental models of disability, levels of expertise, and differing instructional conditions. Additionally, because rights-based systems favor those in power (Valle et al., 2011), “Students with parents who have the resources to sue may be able to access services and be included in educational settings in which special accommodations are made that are not available to other students” (Palley, 2006, p. 229). The individuality of decision making was clear in the disparity and distance between these principals’ working definitions of LRE. Their responses reflected their individual experiences. Their responses also reflected that despite the proliferation of policy documents on LRE at the federal and state levels, the only common understanding of LRE at these schools was idiosyncratic and a negotiated instance for each child, rather a systematic or predictable moment of professional judgment informed by policy intent.

## **Systemic Issues in Special Education**

Scholars have argued that a rights-based legal system is not an effective way to create systemic change (Beratan, 2006; Palley, 2006; Skilton-Sylvester & Slesaransky-Poe, 2009; Zuna & Turnbull, 2004). Focusing on the rights of a few never adequately addresses the normative assumptions that exist in schools and classrooms. Palley (2006) warned that utilizing a system where one group classifies others as needing civil

protection creates an unequal relationship. Additionally, making decisions about individual students based on normative assumptions and individual mental models has led to pervasive problems within special education, such as over-identification and restrictive placements based on race or gender (Fierros, 2006). Research has shown that African American children within high-incident disability categories and segregated classroom placements go hand-in-hand (Jordan, 2005). The lack of clear guidelines for making fair and equitable decisions about LRE was evident in these principals' working definitions of LRE.

### **Emerging Theory**

The LRE clause of IDEA has clearly put students with disabilities in the minds of principals. They understand that they have an obligation to educate all children. It also creates a world of labels that categorizes students and effectively marginalizes them. The ongoing use of terms like *regular* when referring to children without disabilities is problematic and this study demonstrates how IDEA contributes to the ongoing issue of ableism in at least one school district. Given the absence of any language in the transcripts related to designing instruction for all students along with a growing literature on the assimilative nature of IDEA, students with disabilities are segregated within an educational system not designed for them. IDEA does give educators a means and method to provide children relief from the resulting theme of frustration; it provides shelter.

## **Ecosystem**

Over the past 20 years, developmental scientists such as Urie Bronfenbrenner have developed theories of child development that look closely at a child's ecological environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) likened his model to a set of Russian dolls, "conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next" (p. 3). Within these nested structures are both the connections the child has between other persons in their setting and the effects of events which may occur in other settings of further distance from the child that profoundly effect them even when the child is not present (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I believe that this study could further expand upon that developmental theory and make deeper connections with environmental science. This section is designed to draw those connections by exploring how educational ecosystems are currently engineered and how the concept of ecological engineering can impact how students with disabilities interact with their environment in the future.

### **Educational Ecosystem**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the closest structures directly impacting the child as a microsystem. For purposes of this study, I will refer to the child's microsystem of school as their educational ecosystem. Ecosystems consist of a series of elements such as particular beings, habitats, and niches. The human beings in this model refer to students with disabilities, students without disabilities, teachers, parents, and administrators.

Habitats, niches, and ecological engineers represent an interactive web of influence. In any ecosystem, a habitat is usually conceived as the range of environments in their physical form within which a being is physiologically able to exist (Whittaker,

Levin, & Root, 1973). It provides shelter. Whittaker et al. (1973) noted that interactions of one particular being, such as the student with disabilities, with other beings may exclude it from some habitats where it is physiologically able to exist by making the habitat location unfavorable. A niche, stated simply, is the role or position of a particular being within an ecosystem. The niche represents the beings' status and involves their access to resources, shelter, and their vertical position in the ecosystem's hierarchy (Whittaker et al., 1973). The niche of a student with a disability is the role and status that student plays within the system. Likewise, the niches of students without disabilities, teachers, parents, and administrators represent their individual roles in the system. At the top of the ecosystem's hierarchy is the niche of ecological engineer.

Humans have long been identified as tool-using organisms that specialize in engineering (Jones, Lawton, & Shachak, 1994). The niche of an ecological engineer is the creation and maintenance of habitats within an ecosystem. The ecological engineer is the being with the power to control habitats and niches. In the educational ecosystem, this could be the teachers or administrators. Since my analysis in this study identified special education teachers and other principal designees as the most influential over the environment of a student with a disability, they hold the power to engineer what that habitat for any particular child will be. Since these designees do not address engineering to keep the ecosystem healthy as a whole, they may engineer change that positively or negatively affect other parts of the system. Administrators serve as ecological engineers when they engage power-oriented activities such as building a master schedule and determining student assignment to particular classrooms. Additionally, they often serve

as the representative from the local education agency (LEA), the person able to allocate resources, during IEP meetings for students with disabilities. Nevertheless, these principals also deferred some of their power to special education teachers in the matter of LRE.

### **Engineering the Environment**

Ecological engineers have both power and responsibility. While they have the power to build and maintain habitats and distribute resources, they also have significant impact on the overall health and survival of the ecosystem and the beings within it.

To the extent that engineers shape and modify most, possibly all, habitats on earth, and given the trite but true observation that all organisms are adapted to their environment, engineering in some form or other must have driven, or contributed, the evolution of myriads of [beings]. But the extent to which major patterns of evolution might have been different if some types of ecological engineering had not evolved, or had taken different form, is almost entirely unknown. (Jones et al., 1994)

Jones et al. (1994) noted that if engineers make long-lived artifacts, then their effects on the ecosystem will usually also be long lived. In the case of interpreting LRE, if a principal clearly established separate rooms, halls, or other physical environments as specifically designated for students with disabilities, it would take a long time for another principal (engineer) to breakdown the established stigma associated with those environments. Unfortunately, Jones et al. (1994) reported research in environmental

science has shown that because the activities of ecosystem engineers are designed to serve their own purposes, they rarely feel any reciprocal effects.

This is not to say that there cannot be any feedbacks from organisms in the engineered habitat, back to the engineer. Undoubtedly there are, although feedback pathways are probably often rather long, indirect, and frequently slow. They remain virtually unstudied. For some engineers, it is difficult to imagine any reciprocal effects. (Jones et al., 1994, p. 381)

The implications for principals and for their deferral to special education teachers may result in decisions that are not aligned with the schools vision or mission. It could also results in the movement of students through more or less restrictive environments without consideration of the performance of all students as a whole, potentially skewing the distribution of performance by viewing through only the lens of a special educator.

Further complicating this system is the exclusive nature of niches. Whittaker et al. (1973) positioned that no two beings can occupy the same niche for a healthy ecosystem. That is, if two beings attempted to occupy the same niche they would be in direct competition with each other for same resources within the system. Evolution would lead to either the extinction of one or the creation of another niche. For example, if students with and without disabilities attempted to occupy the same niche within the school ecosystem – they would have to share all available resources such as teachers, materials, classrooms, etc. Eventually one of two things would happen, either 1) one of them would face extinction, eliminating the dichotomously competitive relationship or leaving just the being of *students*, or 2) one would be forced to find another niche in order

to access other resources. IDEA clearly established the latter option by requiring students to be grouped and labeled in order for a school to receive additional resources to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Not everything within any microsystem is within the control of ecological engineers. There are additional factors that influence the environment. Because it would be impossible to list them all, I am focusing on three which stand out as most important for this study. First, there is a dyadic relationship among beings. One affects the other and vice-versa. If one member of a pair undergoes a process of development, so does the other one. “Recognition of this relationship provides a key to understanding developmental changes not only in children but also in adults who serve as primary caregivers – mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, and so on” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). During the interviews for this study, I asked participants to tell me about a particular student or situation. Each principal was able to clearly articulate a story of at least one student where the decision surrounding the LRE left a lasting imprint. They described situations they believed were successful and some unsuccessful. Those dyadic interactions formed what they thought and believed about LRE.

Second, ecological transitions are developmental for individuals as well as for their group. Examples of ecological transitions include: (a) being promoted from one grade to another, (b) teachers retiring and new teachers being hired, and (c) siblings of students joining the educational ecosystem. When the participants of this study were describing a particular situation related to the LRE of a student, the students involved were frequently those undergoing a transition. The students were either new through



grade level promotion (PreK to K5), moving to the school, or being considered for movement out of the school. Ecological transitions are developmentally important because they can represent potential changes in the niche, or role, and the associated expectations for behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Lastly, any microsystem is vulnerable to changes in larger mesosystems or biospheres. When looking through the traditional lens of environmental science, any ecosystem can be built, maintained, or destroyed by other environmental factors such as floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, or hurricanes. Similarly, an educational ecosystem can be affected by larger forces such as redistricting, emerging charter schools, and state or federal policies. In this study, the ecosystem was affected by a central office decision to pull students with disabilities for specialized instruction during science and social studies, placing externally imposed obstacles into the ecosystem.

### **Engineering for Compatibility**

“Roles have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts, what she does, and thereby even what she thinks and feels. The principle applies not only to the developing person but to the others in her world” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Each ecosystem has its own blueprint for survival. Fortunately, blueprints can be changed and the environment can become markedly altered (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While the niche of students with disabilities places them in a lower status within the ecosystem’s hierarchy, it also affords them resources and habitats for survival. All ecosystems are rife with change. Foster and Kalil (2005) argued that using developmental science frameworks can link developmental outcomes to public policies and the choices they

target. Studies such as the one presented here can inform policy research. “The effect of public policies on children...can be understood as processes that can change environments and people” (Foster & Kalil, 2005).

Organisms regularly confront conditions in their environments that are temporarily beyond their ‘limits of tolerance,’ however these limits are defined. If the environment did not change, a population of such organisms would become extinct unless sustained by immigration from more favorable regions. However, environments do change, and a population’s survival in a changing environment may depend crucially on its responses to unfavorable periods, during which the best it can do is to ‘cut its losses,’ while making up for these during more favorable periods. We thus cannot include only favorable environmental conditions in our discussion of habitat. (Whittaker et al., 1973, p. 328)

Based on this study, LRE is not a favorable environmental condition because it supports and maintains ableism.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to use critical discourse analysis to establish themes from among the participant voices and to extend those themes by introducing an emerging theory on the individual school as an educational ecosystem. Schools are complex ecosystems in which uncountable variables are continually influencing the environment, not the least of which appears to be the LRE clause of IDEA. Chapter Six provides a summary of this study and recommendations for both practice and future research.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DISCUSSION

#### **Introduction**

This study was a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of a portion of educational policy for students with disabilities, the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). As described in Chapter 3, the methods of CDA were a useful set of procedures for a vertical analysis of policy that asserted public education as a right for children with disabilities. The vertical policy levels included court cases and federal legislation and regulations, documents at the state level, and school level interpretations of LRE in a selected urban school district. Chapter Four provided the vertical analysis across the discourse planes and revealed that for this district, LRE was not interpreted in written discourse. Chapter Five offered a horizontal analysis of five elementary school principals' discourse about LRE. Chapter Five also offered an emergent theory of how discourse affects perceptions of ableism as well as how that theory might offer a counteraction to the current use of LRE in children's worlds. Chapter Six consists of a summary of the study, discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research. The purpose of the last sections is to expand upon the implications the study may have for teachers, principals, and policy-makers and to make suggestions for further research.

#### **Summary of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine discourses that undergird the social construction of the LRE clause of IDEA by answering four research questions.

- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within case law interpretations and federal regulations related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices in the LRE section of the South Carolina Office of Exceptional Children Process Guide?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices within a selected urban district's policies and guidelines related to LRE?
- What discourse themes can be interpreted from the textual choices found in face-to-face interviews with five traditional elementary school principals?

This study explored the relationship between discourse about LRE and the presence of ableism in our state policies and, in turn, in our public schools. It was designed to answer the primary research question; does the LRE clause of the IDEA create or reinforce institutional ableism?

Founded in the epistemological perspective of constructivism, I used a critical theory to conduct a discourse analysis across three different discourse positions. Critical forms of inquiry question current ideology and initiate calls for action against social injustice and hegemony (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 2003; Glesne, 2011). Fairclough (1995) argued that “One is typically unaware of one’s ways of talking unless for some reason they are subjected to conscious scrutiny, so also is one typically unaware of what ways of seeing, what ideological representations, underlie one’s talk” (pp. 39-40). As a methodology, CDA allowed for the analysis of institutionalized forms of talking and

writing, in those sites where social domination and inequality arise (Stamou & Padeliadu, 2009). Using critical discourse analysis as my methodology I was able to gain understanding of how the language found in the LRE clause of IDEA reinforces institutional ableism.

The study reviewed three different forms of document discourse, including relevant case law interpretations, federal legislation and regulations, and state level regulations and guidance documents. Despite expectations, a plane of discourse at the urban school district level was not obtained in this study. The final discourse plane used interview data from five different elementary school principals located within the same southeastern urban school district. Participants engaged in face-to-face interviews, answering two broad questions on what they knew about the LRE clause of IDEA and how they used their understanding to make educational decisions about the placement of students with disabilities in their schools. The principals reported a range of services available within their school district.

The data was analyzed by engaging in three different coding cycles, each applying different methods of discourse analysis. In cycle one, I used In Vivo coding and memos. This allowed me to retain the authenticity of the discourse fragments and to document my own interactions with the data. In cycle two, I used Value, Versus, and Magnitude coding to identify any discourse fragments that, from a critical perspective, may contain underlying mental models of how students with disabilities are considered within the their educational community. In cycle three, I made connections between discourse fragments to identify discourse strands that ran both vertically and horizontally

through the different discourse positions. In Chapter Five, I expanded upon the horizontal discourse strands by identifying themes and an emerging theory to help explain and understand how ableism exists in our schools and the role that IDEA has in maintaining ableism.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Skilton-Sylvester and Slearansky-Poe (2009) worried that because the LRE clause focuses exclusively on the needs of students with disabilities, the clause would become more managerial than substantive. The findings of this study indicate that their concerns were justified. These principals' understanding of LRE was highly disparate, with some vague references to terms like accommodations, regular education, and mandate. There was no clear criterion for removal from general education setting once the student was identified. Once labeled under IDEA, students in this particular district are removed for at least some period of time during the school day.

Additionally, because IDEA provides additional resources to students categorized with specific labels for disabilities, the policy immediately creates a different niche in the educational ecosystem. Individuals with power would have to actively try to engineer a blending of resources in order to for all students to coexist within the same niche. In that way, IDEA actively maintains ableism and creates barriers and obstacles to those who may wish to deconstruct old mental models of disability.

This study supports Stamou and Padelidu's (2009) finding that education professionals continue to be entrenched in the medical understanding of disability, which

emphasizes a focus on impairment and reduces students from identity as individuals to diagnostic categories. This study demonstrated that students were consistently identified by their disability label, frequently as their disability label.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study has implications for individuals interested in eliminating ableism within schools. Teachers, administrators and policy-makers could gain additional insight into the means by which students with disabilities have been stigmatized and segregated through the existing discourses and mental models that permeate the educational system. In an era of accountability, this moment may be an optimal time to challenge existing paradigms. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is due for reauthorization, as is IDEA. Individuals from different discourse positions could use this opportunity to create change in practices.

Liasidou (2008) argued that “Practitioners need to be empowered in order to interrogate and disassemble the pervasive effects of language on their pedagogies and their discursive embodiments which are accountable for the multitude of exclusionary and oppressive educational practices” (p. 496). Teachers (general and special educators) and administrators should be encouraged to examine the language they use when discussing students with disabilities. Any efforts they make towards using person-first discourse fragments and avoiding use the of disability labels as a defining characteristic of any child could represent a change among the mental models of those within their discourse positions. Special education teachers should re-examine their own role and

consider relinquishing the power designated to them through policy and decades of positivistic practices. Instead, they should consider exerting their efforts on helping general educator teachers understand learning differences and advocate for greater disability awareness.

Teachers should also be aware of the over-reliance on the use of separate environments for students as a mechanism to relieve their perceived student frustration. Rather than engage in demonizing educational standards and creating environments to shelter for students struggling with those standards, teachers should consider implementing universal designs for learning within the general education environment. Given that movement to separate environments inherently creates a modification of the academic standards, teachers should consider applying those same modifications in the general environment first. In the same vein, special education teachers should take seriously their role in helping students be successful in the general education environment by providing the supports, accommodations, and modifications necessary for that success. When special educators retreat into their separate habitats, they leave general education teachers without the resources and supports necessary to make their academic and social environments healthy for all students.

Policy-makers should, at a minimum, remove any dichotomous language elements from legislation or regulations. The term *regular* should be removed from any education legislation. They should also reconsider the way in which additional resources are allocated to schools to help struggling learners. By requiring students to be labeled among categories of disabilities for access to funding and resources, policy makers set up



a potentially punitive system which has long-standing social, emotional, and academic implications.

Policy-makers should be encouraged to merge legislation (such as ESEA and IDEA) together, revisiting the concept of federal block grant models to ensure that schools are appropriately funded to meet the needs of all students. The history of federal block grants between the Nixon and Reagan eras experienced mixed success and eventually lost momentum due to the enormous impact of partisan and special interest groups (Conlan, 1984). Attempting to implement nonpartisan legislative reform would be difficult. Special education history is a chronicle of group advocacy efforts (Whitby & Wienke, 2011). Currently, the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) represents efforts of approximately 100 disability interest groups (Whitby & Wienke, 2011). These groups include individual disability advocates as well as education and medical professionals across different areas of practice. As Conlan (1984) stated, “Once positions have become polarized, it is difficult – though not impossible – to resurrect a more consensual style of politics” (p. 270). Rather than fear a reenactment of the history of disability, policy-makers should envision a more inclusive framework for the future. One in which the education of all children is prioritized. This could only be accomplished if special education advocates believe and trust that the interest of students with disabilities will continue to be protected.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The goal of this study was to investigate the influence of the LRE clause of IDEA on institutional ableism. The findings, although informative, have some limitations. One

limitation is that the study only included a small portion of the discourse elements in IDEA that may have social connections to institutional ableism. Other basic elements of IDEA should be examined as well, such as a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and the development of an Individual Education Program (IEP) – both of which are available only to students with labels of disability. That is, good educational practices may indicate that such rights should extend to all students.

Future research into this subject also could include analysis of the longitudinal impact of students who are removed from the general education environment. The findings of this study indicated that principals generally did not believe such segregation had a negative social/emotional impact on students, or at least it did not until the student got to be old enough to realize the reason for the removal. Researchers may want to consider exploring the concepts associated with the phenomenon of defeatism among students with disabilities. Defeatism is the attitude or conduct of a person who expects defeat and believes any further effort would be futile. This study was conducted at an elementary school level and the theme of student frustration and need for help was significant for students so young. Further expansion of the research should focus on African American students with disabilities. Given the history of over-identification of African American males in special education (Jordon, 2005), the use of Critical Race Theory would be an appropriate theoretical perspective.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study expanded the work of previous researchers in ableism who have exposed issues arising from deficit oriented mental models of students with disabilities. The findings of this study have implications for the knowledge base in the field by drawing discourse connections (or lack of) between policy and practice. It also provided a forum for selected elementary principals' voices, the words of honest and earnest principals who were actively attempting to meet the needs of all their students. Finally, it provided an opportunity to suggest making deeper connections with environmental science and how educators may better understand the dynamics within their educational ecosystem.

## APPENDICES

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

1. Tell me what you know about and how you handle the least restrictive environment for students in your school.
2. Can you think of a particular child and tell me about how you handled determining the least restrictive environment for that student?

## Appendix B

### Fourth Circuit Case Law

Case Law References	Excerpts
Devries v. Fairfax County School Board (1989)	<p>Devries does not contest the Board's compliance with the Act's procedural requirements but complains that the IEP does not provide the appropriate public education he is entitled to receive. He contends that the district court, in upholding the Board's proposed IEP, failed to consider the <b>mainstreaming</b> <sup>[[*6]]</sup> requirements of the Act. Simply stated, DeVries argues that the evidence shows that he would be better educated at Annandale High School and that, even if that were not so, the Board did not sustain its burden of proving that he could not receive the statutorily mandated "appropriate" education at Annandale.</p> <p>Although we empathize with DeVries' desire to be placed in a public high school with his sister and other non-handicapped children, we cannot agree that the facts demonstrate that he would receive an "appropriate public education" at that institution. We are persuaded that the district court fully considered the Act's <b>mainstreaming</b> requirements but correctly concluded that Michael could not be satisfactorily educated in <b>regular classes</b> even with the use of supplementary aids and services.</p> <p><b>Mainstreaming</b> of handicapped children into <b>regular school programs</b> where they might have opportunities to study and to socialize with non-handicapped children is not only a laudable goal but is also a requirement of the Act. Specifically, <sup>[[HN3]]</sup> the Act mandates that states establish procedures to assure that, to the <b>maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children</b> . . . are educated with <sup>[[*7]]</sup> <b>children who are not handicapped</b>, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the <b>regular educational environment</b> occurs only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in <b>regular classes</b> with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.</p>

<p>A.W. v. Fairfax County School Board (2004)</p>	<p>As noted above, the FAPE requirement addresses the substantive content of the educational services the <b>disabled student</b> is entitled to receive under the IDEA. The LRE requirement reflects the IDEA's preference that "to the <b>maximum extent appropriate</b>, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled." See 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5) (2000); 34 C.F.R. § 300.550(b)(1). However, this preference for <b>'mainstreaming' disabled students</b> is not absolute; § 1412(a)(5) permits the delivery of educational services to <b>disabled students</b> in less integrated settings as necessitated by the student's disability. A.B. ex rel. D.B. v. Lawson, 354 F.3d 315, 330 (4th Cir. 2004).</p> <p>Although the foregoing indicates that the definition of [**18] "educational placement" should reflect the <b>'mainstreaming'</b> ideal of the LRE requirement, it does not appear that the term also includes the precise physical location where a <b>disabled student</b> is educated. The LRE requirement directs that the <b>disabled student</b> be assigned to a setting that resembles as closely as possible the setting to which he would be assigned if not disabled. See Rowley, 458 U.S. at 202-03 &amp; n. 24. The IDEA's concern with location thus focuses on the degree to which any particular assignment segregates a <b>disabled student</b> from <b>nondisabled students</b>, rather than on the precise location of the assignment itself. Given the IDEA's concern with <b>'mainstreaming'</b> and appropriate educational content, we find little support in the IDEA's underlying principles for AW's assertion that "educational placement" should be construed to secure his right to attend school in a particular classroom at a particular location.</p>
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A.B. v. Board of Education of Anne Arundel County (2004)	<p>Md. Regs. Code tit. 13A § 05.01.10 [HN3] In addition to IDEA's requirement [**5] that the state provide each student with some educational benefit, the student must be placed in the least restrictive environment to achieve the FAPE. The <b>disabled child</b> is to participate in the same activities as <b>non-disabled children</b> to the "maximum extent appropriate." 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(5)(A); see also 34 C.F.R. § 300.550 ("That special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily."); (regulations concerning least restrictive environments). We stated in DeVries v. Fairfax County Sch. Bd., 882 F.2d 876, 878 (4th Cir. 1989), "<b>mainstreaming</b> of handicapped children into <b>regular school programs</b> . . . is not only a laudable goal but is also a requirement of the Act."</p> <p>Given that we find the district court erred in overturning the ALJ's findings that the IEP provided a FAPE, it follows a fortiori that the AACPS IEP, with its integrated curriculum, was less restrictive than the wholly segregated Summit School. IDEA requires <b>mainstreaming</b> that Summit School does not provide. 20 U.S.C. 1412(5)(B); see DeVries, 882 F.2d at 876. While the district court stated that it was "mindful of the Congressional preference for <b>mainstreaming</b>," Dist. Ct. Op. at 19 (J.A. 73), its holding that only the wholly segregated educational environment that Summit provided offered a FAPE refutes such purported mindfulness.</p> <p>In sum, the magistrate judge ignored the congressional preference for <b>mainstreaming</b>, clearly and strongly substituted its views on education and IDEA for that of Congress, and failed to accord the ALJ's factual findings the requisite degree of deference. In reversing the ALJ, the district court consistently failed to heed [HN14] "IDEA's recognition that federal courts cannot run local schools."</p>
M.B. v. Fairfax County School Board (1991)	<p>Although the state must place a child in "the least restrictive environment," 34 C.F.R. § 300.552(d), the Act and regulations do not establish specific guidelines defining the IEP's substantive content. The Act, however, requires that <b>handicapped children</b> be educated in <b>regular classrooms</b> with <b>non-handicapped children</b> to the greatest extent possible. 20 U.S.C. § 1412(5)(B). Educating a <b>handicapped child</b> in <b>regular classrooms</b> with <b>non-handicapped children</b> is known as "<b>mainstreaming</b>."</p>



Malone v. School Board of County of Prince William (1985)	The LRE concept popularly referred to as <b>mainstreaming</b> , means that <b>handicapped children</b> , to the <b>maximum extent appropriate</b> , are to be educated with <b>non-handicapped children</b> . In order to comply with the FAPE and LRE requirements, an Individual Education Program ("IEP") must be formulated to meet each <b>handicapped child's</b> unique educational needs and is to be reviewed at least annually. 20 U.S.C. § 1401 (19) and § 1414(a)(5).
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## Appendix C

### Federal and State Legislation, Regulation, and Guidance on Least Restrictive Environment

Reference	Common Name	Definition of Least Restrictive Environment
Individuals with Disabilities Education (2004)	IDEA 2004	<b>Sec. 612 (a)(5) Least restrictive environment.</b> -- (A) In general.--To the <b>maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities</b> , including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with <b>children who are not disabled</b> , and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of <b>children with disabilities</b> from the <b>regular educational environment</b> occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in <b>regular classes</b> with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.
Assistance to States for the Education of Children With Disabilities and Preschool Grants for Children With Disabilities (2006)	Federal Regulations for IDEA 2004	<b>Sec. 300.114 LRE requirements.</b> (a) General. (2) Each public agency must ensure that-- (i) To the <b>maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities</b> , including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with <b>children who are nondisabled</b> ; and (ii) Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of <b>children with disabilities</b> from the <b>regular educational environment</b> occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in <b>regular classes</b> with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.
Special Education, Education of Students with Disabilities (2012)	State Regulations	<b>D. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)</b> 1. LRE requirements. a) General. (2) Each public agency must ensure that-- (i) To the <b>maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities</b> , including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with <b>children who are nondisabled</b> ; and (ii) Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of <b>children with disabilities</b> from the <b>regular educational</b>

		<p><b>environment</b> occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in <b>regular classes</b> with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.</p>
Office of Exceptional Children (2013)	Special Education Process Guide	<p><b><u>Least Restrictive Environment</u></b></p> <p>Least restrictive environment (LRE) means the educational placement in which, to the <b>maximum extent appropriate</b>, <b>children with disabilities</b>, including children in institutions or other care facilities, are educated with <b>children who are not disabled</b>. The IEP must contain an explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with <b>children without disabilities</b> in the <b>general education class</b> and in extracurricular and nonacademic activities with program modifications or supports for LEA personnel. <b>Children with disabilities</b> are to be removed from the <b>general education environment</b> only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in <b>general education classes</b> with the use of supplementary aids and services or modifications cannot be achieved satisfactorily.</p> <p>In determining the location for special education and related services the IEP team must consider the continuum of educational placements necessary to implement the IEP. The LEA must ensure that the parents of each child are members of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of their child. The placement decision must be made in conformity with the requirement of providing services in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The educational placement is to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• determined at least annually;</li> <li>• based upon the child's IEP; and</li> <li>• located as close as possible to the child's home, consistent with the requirements of the IEP.</li> </ul> <p>Students may not be removed from required courses in order to receive their special education services. In February 2010, in the letter to Irby, OSEP clearly stated that it would be inappropriate for the IEP Team to deny <b>children with disabilities</b> the opportunity to participate in <b>general education classes</b> required</p>

		<p>of all students solely to receive special education services. The IEP Team should consider additional strategies and scheduling, such as an extended school day or extended school year, if the child requires such instruction in order to receive a free appropriate public education. IEP Teams must take into consideration the time required in subjects that are the components of the LEA instructional program. (p. 66)</p> <p>Federal laws emphasize having high expectations for each child and enabling each child to participate and progress in the <b>general education curriculum</b>. Given those foundations, resulting educational placement decisions must be based upon providing services within the least restrictive environment. The IEP team must consider special education and related services required to meet the individual needs of <b>children with disabilities</b>. (p. 79)</p> <p>Federal laws emphasize having high expectations for each child and enabling each child to participate and progress in the <b>general education curriculum</b>. Given those foundations, resulting educational placement decisions must be based upon providing services within the least restrictive environment. The IEP team must consider special education and related services required to meet the individual needs of <b>children with disabilities</b>. (P. 91)</p> <p>Educational placement refers to the educational environment for the provision of special education and related services rather than a specific place, such as a specific classroom or school. The IEP team makes the decision about the child's educational placement. For <b>children with disabilities</b>, the special education and related services must be provided in the environment that is least restrictive, with the <b>general education classroom</b> as the initial consideration. The team's decision must be based on the child's needs, goals to be achieved, and the least restrictive environment for services to be provided. "Least restrictive environment" (LRE) means the child is provided special education and related services with <b>peers who are not disabled</b>, to the <b>maximum extent appropriate</b>.</p>
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		<p>The IEP team must consider how the child with a disability can be educated with <b>peers without disabilities</b> to <b>the maximum extent appropriate</b>, and how he or she will participate with <b>children without disabilities</b> in other activities such as extracurricular and nonacademic activities. Placement decisions for all <b>children with disabilities</b>, including preschool children with disabilities, must be determined annually, be based on the child's IEP, and be as close as possible to the child's home. Additionally, each child with a disability must be educated in the school the child would attend if the child did not have a disability, unless the child's IEP requires some other arrangement. LRE does not require that every <b>child with a disability</b> be placed in the <b>general education classroom</b> regardless of the child's individual abilities and needs. The law recognizes that full time <b>general education classroom</b> placement may not be appropriate for every child with a disability. LEAs must make available a range of placement options, known as a continuum of alternative placements, to meet the unique educational needs of <b>children with disabilities</b>. This requirement for a continuum reinforces the importance of the individualized inquiry, not a "one size fits all" approach, in determining what placement is the LRE for each <b>child with a disability</b>. The continuum of alternative educational placements include instruction in <b>general education classes</b>, special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions (34 CFR § 300.115(b)(1). ( p. 94)</p>
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## **Appendix D**

### **Information about Being in a Research Study** Clemson University IRB# 2012-023

#### **The Least Restrictive Environment Clause of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Institutional Ableism: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

##### **Description of the Study and Your Part in It**

Dr. Jane Clark Lindle and Laura O’Laughlin are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Lindle is a Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership at Clemson University. Laura O’Laughlin is a student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Lindle. The purpose of this research is explore what discourse themes are enacted by elementary school principals when operationalizing the least restrictive environment mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Act within their schools.

Your part in the study will be to participate in a face-to-face recorded interview consisting of one global question and follow-up question/s.

It will take you about one hour to be in this study.

##### **Risks and Discomforts**

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

##### **Possible Benefits**

We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, this research may help us to understand how principals enact discourse within their schools based on federal, state, and local policies and procedures.

##### **Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. We will not tell anybody outside of the research team that you were in this study or what information we collected about you in particular. All identifying information will be removed from the study. You will be asked to select a pseudonym. If you prefer not to, one will be assigned.

### **Choosing to Be in the Study**

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Lindle at Clemson University at 865-508-0629. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-6460 or [irb@clemson.edu](mailto:irb@clemson.edu). If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC's toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

### **Consent**

**I have read this form and have been allowed to ask any questions I might have. I agree to take part in this study.**

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:  
\_\_\_\_\_

A copy of this form will be given to you.

## Appendix E

### Interview Theme Validation

School	Labels and Deficits	Frustration and Help	Dichotomy	Positions of Power	Responsibility for Student Performance
Savannah Elementary	x	x	x	x	x
Alpine Elementary	x	x	x	x	x
Prairie Elementary	x	x	x	x	x
Sea Cliffs Elementary		x	x	x	x
Appalachian Elementary	x	x	x		x



## Appendix F

### Curriculum Vitae

**Laura C. O'Laughlin**

10 Old Taylor Ct., Greenville SC 29615

Phone (864)630-9742, Alternate Phone (864)607-6039, allyandpaddy@gmail.com

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### Educational Background

Doctorate, Educational Leadership P-12, Clemson University, projected 2013

Masters of Arts, Varying Exceptionalities, University of South Florida, 1997

Bachelor in Elementary Education, Northern Michigan University, 1993

### Certificates Earned

Elementary Principal Certification (K-8), South Carolina, Exp. 2015

Multi-Categorical Disabilities (K-12) Professional Certificate, South Carolina, Exp. 2015

Varying Exceptionalities (K-12) Professional Certificate, Florida, Exp. 2009

Elementary Education (K-6) Initial Certificate, Florida, Exp. 1998

Elementary Education (K-6) Provisional Certificate, Michigan, Exp. 1995

### Administrative Experience

2012 – Pres. Director of Special Education Services

Greenville County Schools, SC

2010 – 2012 **Compliance and Monitoring Coordinator**

Greenville County Schools, SC

2006 – 2009 Program **Coordinator of Preschool Special Education and Child Find**

Greenville County Schools, SC

2006 – 2009 **Supervisor of Preschool Arena Assessment**

Greenville County School, SC

2005 - 2006 **Staffing Specialist**

Area III District Office, School District of Hillsborough County, FL

2005 - 2006 **Core Area Support Team member (CAST)**

Area III, School District of Hillsborough County, FL

2003 – 2006 **Professional Practice Partner (PPP)**

University of South Florida, Tampa, FL

2004 – 2005 **Mentor Teacher**

Leto High School, School District of Hillsborough County, FL

2001 – 2005 **Special Education Department Chairperson**

Leto High School, Hillsborough County Schools, FL

### Instructional Experience

2001 – 2005 **Varying Exceptionalities Teacher**

Leto High School, School District of Hillsborough County, FL

1998 - 2001 **Trainable Mentally Handicapped Teacher**

Leto High School, School District of Hillsborough County, FL

- 1996 – 1998 **Emotionally Handicapped Teacher**  
 Leto High School and Sligh Junior High, School District of Hillsborough  
 County, FL
- 1994 – 1996 **Varying Exceptionalities Teacher**  
 Charter Behavior Health System of Tampa Bay, FL

### **Professional Memberships**

Council for Exceptional Children, current  
 Council of Administrators of Special Education, current  
 American Educational Research Association, current  
 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, current

### **Training, Presentations, And Research**

- O'Laughlin, L. (2008, September). *Child Study Team*. Training conducted for Greenville County Schools, SC.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2009, February). IDEA Part B 619: Training and Overview. Training conducted for Greenville County Schools, SC.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2009, April). *Accurate Identification of Preschool Students through Arena Assessment*, Paper presented at the Council for Exceptional Children National Convention and Expo, Seattle, WA.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2009, October). *Natural Setting Observations*. Training conducted for Greenville County Schools, SC.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2010, March). *Early Childhood Outcomes*. Training conducted for Greenville County Schools, SC.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2009, September). Going to college: A research synthesis of transition and the freshman experience for students with intellectual disabilities and their parents [White paper]. Clemson, SC: Clemson University.
- O'Laughlin, L., Martin, M. H., & Stegeline, D. (July, 2010). *South Carolina's preschool for underserved 3 and 4 year olds*. Paper presented at the Liberty Fellowship Summit 2010, Columbia, SC. Retrieved from [http://www.libertyfellowshipsc.org/files/research/Preschool%20for%20Underserved%203%20and%204%20Year%20Olds\\_LF\\_Final.pdf](http://www.libertyfellowshipsc.org/files/research/Preschool%20for%20Underserved%203%20and%204%20Year%20Olds_LF_Final.pdf)
- O'Laughlin, L. (2011, January). Early childhood service delivery taskforce: Report and recommendations [White paper]. Greenville, SC: Greenville County Schools.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2011, August). A Parent's Guide to Understanding the IEP Process. Lecture conducted at the Upstate Autism Forum, Greenville, SC.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2012, August). *IDEA Overview*. Training conducted for Greenville County Schools, SC.
- O'Laughlin, L. (2012, August). *The Foundations of Reevaluations*. Training conducted for Greenville County Schools, SC.

### **Activities, Awards, and Grants**

*Improve Preschool Outcomes*. Sponsored by SC Office of Exceptional Children. \$50,000 from August 2010 through June 2011.

*Response to Intervention for Behavior.* Sponsored by SC Office of Exceptional Children. \$50,000 from August 2009 through June 2010.

*2000 Chartered Chapter of Best Buddies High Schools,* School District of Hillsborough County, FL.

*2010 Top Ten Teacher of the Year for Exceptional Education* – An annual award granted by the School District of Hillsborough County, FL.

*1995 Eagle Award* – Recognized for exceptional performance as an educator by Charter Behavioral Health System.

*1996 Eagle Award* – Recognized for exceptional performance as an educator by Charter Behavioral Health System.

*1997 Letter of Commendation* – Recognized for exceptional performance and leadership by Charter Behavioral Health System.

*1993 Student Commencement Speaker* – Selected by faculty committee to represent the graduating class of December 1993 as student commencement speaker of Northern Michigan University.

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